Keyhole Crime

FATAL SWITCH

Ian Stuart

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I was lying on the cement just clear of the flames. I saw his boot coming and tried to roll out of the way but with my bad leg I was too slow. The boot caught me in the ribs and I gasped with pain.

As if through a haze I heard him run off and saw the flames playing round him. The door slammed shut and I was alone with the fire . . .

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FATAL SWITCH

Ian Stuart

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CHAPTER ONE

They say it's the little things that really bring tragedy home to you. The second thing I noticed when I saw Bob Gurney's body was the hole in his right shoe; the first had been his face but after one brief glance I looked away, appalled. They were only old working shoes but somehow that hole seemed like a reproach, as if I hadn't paid him enough to buy a decent pair.

He was lying on the cement floor of Finlays' assembly shop beside the twisted remains of the scaffold tower, his other leg twisted under him. A steel bar had struck the front of his skull, crushing it. He must have died instantaneously. That, at least, was something to be thankful for.

I had known Gurney as long as I could remember, he had been with the company ever since my father founded it, longer than any of the other men except Wally Thompson. When I was a kid and my father took me to the works I often saw him, a stolid man with a friendly smile. In those days he had called me 'Neil'. Later, when I came back from university and went into the business it was 'Mr Neil'. When I took over the management it became 'sir'. It had taken me a little while to get used to

that. He was one of the old school, loyal, conscientious, apparently content. Or perhaps it wasn't really an old school at all, with luck there would always be men like that. Seeing him lying there my mind refused to accept that he was dead and I turned away.

'It's a bloody shambles,' the lad beside me muttered. He was only seventeen and his voice was still shocked.

I nodded.

The assembly shop resembled a film set. Emergency lights illuminated this end with their harsh brilliance and left the rest in shadow. At the fringe of the light the overhead gear loomed huge and vaguely menacing. Three towers had been erected across the width of the shop, it was the middle one that had collapsed, pinning Gurney under it.

The doctor had left before I arrived. Summoned from bed by a 'phone call from Ted Everett, the foreman, I had got here as soon as I could but still it had taken me nearly half an hour. There was nothing the doctor could do but tell the ambulance men to remove the body to the mortuary as soon as the police would let them.

The other men were standing in a group a few yards away, answering a uniformed sergeant's questions. A constable was studying the wreckage of the tower. Everett saw me and came over. He wasn't given to humour at any time, now his features looked pale and drawn, but that could have

been the lighting.

'Was anybody else hurt?" I asked him.

He shook his head. 'No.'

'You've no idea what made it collapse?'

He glanced over his shoulder as if to make sure the policemen couldn't overhear him. 'It turned right over. I reckon it can't have been secured properly. He was working with a power drill on the top platform.'

Long practice could make men careless but we didn't know that was what had happened here. Not yet, anyway.

'I'd known him since I was a kid,' I said.

Everett let it go, he had only been with the firm four or five years but he knew what I meant.

A man passed us, coming from the lavatory, a thin, middle-aged Londoner named Lawrence. He looked white and shocked.

'All right, Harry?' Everett asked him. I heard the dislike in his tone. Contempt, too, I thought.

Lawrence nodded without answering and went to join the others.

'Was he hurt?' I asked, forgetting that Everett had said Gurney was the only casualty.

'He wasn't anywhere near.' As if to himself Everett added, 'Bloody little skiver.'

The sergeant walked across, the young constable following him. They looked calm, undisturbed. Death, even violent and sudden like this, didn't shock them any more. Everett left us.

'Mr Bruce?' the sergeant asked.

'Yes.'

'Nasty business, sir.'

'Very.'

'Have you any idea how it might have happened?'

I wondered what he had already been told. 'No, the men are always careful.'

'Experienced?'

'Very.'

He nodded. 'Well, there's nothing more we can do here. Somebody will be in touch with you later, I expect.'

They walked away, composed, silent figures, not really part of the scene. To them it was just another incident in the night's work. They were sympathetic but they couldn't afford to let their sympathy go very deep.

I watched the ambulance men lift Bob Gurney's body on to a stretcher and carry it away. Everett was talking to the other men and I went over to join them.

'We'd better start clearing that lot,' he said, nodding towards the remains of the tower.

They set to work. In the cramped space between the machines and without a crane it was a difficult operation, sections that were twisted out of recognition had to be dismantled before they could be moved. Men heaved and sweated, swearing at each other because they were on edge.

I joined in, bitterly aware that my bad leg made me no more use than a boy of fourteen would have been. Five years ago I would have held my own with any of them, now they only tolerated me because I was the boss, if I had been anyone else they would have told me curtly to clear off. But I couldn't bring myself to leave them to it and being there, I had to do something.

The upper section was dismantled and the parts stacked at the side of the shop. Then they tackled the rest, dragging that aside too. Suddenly one of them exclaimed, 'Look 'ere!'

The rest of us stopped. He was staring at one of the main vertical members. As well as being buckled like the others it had split in a jagged line.

'That's what did it,' another man muttered.

We looked, not saying anything. Then I picked up the end of the bar and dragged it clear. Before long somebody would want to see it.

'All right,' Everett said.

They resumed the dreary task.

At last it was done. They stood in a silent group and waited.

'You'd better get that lot back to the works,' I told Everett.

He nodded. I looked at my watch; it was nearly half-past five. Another two hours at least before it was light. I said goodbye and walked out into the cold December night.

Driving through the seemingly endless North

London streets with their smoke-grimed terraces and shabby little shops, then, farther out, the neat suburban houses, I wondered how I was going to break the news to Mrs Gurney. How did you tell a woman the husband who had left her to go to work as usual a few hours ago wouldn't be coming home, ever? That was something they didn't teach you at college.

I turned on to the motorway and pressed my foot down hard on the accelerator.

When I opened the door the flat struck cold with the bleak chill of a wintry hour before the dawn. I decided it wasn't worth going back to bed, lit the gas fire in the living-room and sat there, still in my coat. I was exhausted but I knew the tiredness was mental as much as physical.

After ten minutes the room was warmer. I stirred myself, took off my coat and went out to the kitchen to make some coffee.

The flat was on the second floor with store rooms and the workshop below. It was small and nobody could have called it elegant but it suited me, I would have been lost in anywhere grander and it was convenient for the works. Too convenient sometimes. In my father's time the rooms had been used for storing all sorts of old lumber. After the accident when Barbara was killed I was in hospital for four months and when I came out I couldn't face living in our house again, it seemed too much like a

symbol of failure. I sold it and most of the furniture, converted the store rooms into a flat and moved in. I had done most of the work myself, slowly and pretty painfully because my leg hadn't completely healed, and my feeling of achievement when it was finished would have appeared ridiculous to anyone else.

That was more than four years ago and now I could think about our marriage without it hurting much. It hadn't been a success. I was twenty-five when we married and Barbara a couple of years younger. Looking back, I could see how immature we had both been. Barbara had wanted fun and gaiety; after the first few months she resented coming home from work to find the household chores waiting. I had watched her grow more and more disillusioned and petulant and didn't know what to do about it. She had refused to give up her job, she couldn't face being just a housewife she had told me a dozen times when I suggested it. Anyway, she enjoyed her work as a dentist's receptionist. She hadn't wanted the baby.

We were driving home from a weekend with her parents—it was their silver wedding—and Barbara was five months pregnant. An elderly woman in an 1100 pulled out of a side road right in front of us. I swerved to avoid her and we hit a telegraph pole on the other side of the road. Barbara wasn't wearing a seat belt, by then she was finding them uncomfortable, and she was thrown through the windscreen.

She died in the ambulance on the way to hospital.

The other woman wasn't hurt.

At the inquest she swore she had looked before she turned on to the main road; I must have been driving too fast. It was a clear summer evening, there was hardly any traffic and I was doing fifty miles an hour because if I drove any faster Barbara felt queasy. The woman was well known in the district, a kindly, respectable widow. She wasn't charged with dangerous driving, pleaded guilty to driving without due care and attention and escaped with a few pounds fine.

Eighteen months after I came out of hospital my father arrived home one evening after a meeting saying he didn't feel very well and thought he would lie down for a while. Half an hour later he was dead. The next day I took over the management of W. T. Bruce (Electrical Contractors) Ltd.

I had been fond of my father but that didn't blind me to his shortcomings. One of them was a dislike of delegating any authority to other people. He had built up the business from nothing, it was his and he would run it. It had annoyed me at times but I could see his point of view and I knew there were plenty of men like him. The trouble was that when I had to take over I wasn't much better qualified for the job than the girl on the switchboard. A degree in electrical engineering hadn't taught me anything about managing men or understanding accounts. I had to learn as I went along. Week after week I

stayed late at the office or took work up to the flat and pored over it for hours in the evenings.

When I first came out of hospital by the end of the day I was tired out. All I wanted to do in the evenings was read or watch television and I was often in bed by ten. Then, after a few months I had started going out occasionally to meet friends for a drink. Now my social life ceased to exist. I lived, ate and sometimes dreamed Bruces. But by the end of three months I had learnt enough to feel I could run the business efficiently and deal with the men as well as the bank and our accountants.

But none of that qualified me for what I had to do now.

CHAPTER TWO

The men hadn't started arriving and it was still quiet when I went downstairs and into the office by the side door. I found Mrs Foster's keys in her desk and opened the drawer of the filing cabinet labelled 'STAFF', feeling a twinge of guilt that I had to look up Bob Gurney's address. My father would have known it.

The house turned out to be a terraced cottage in a street not far from the abbey, neat and trim as I would have expected his home to be, with a patch of garden at the front. Mrs Gurney matched it, a plump, homely-looking woman with grey hair. I broke the news to her as gently as I could, stayed a little while, then drove round to fetch her married daughter to be with her. It meant explaining all over again.

When I got back to the works there was another car parked next to Nancy Day's elderly Triumph Herald. A big Bristol 603. My heart sank a few degrees more, the Bristol belonged to my half-brother Max. He didn't visit the works very often and I wished he hadn't chosen this of all days to come. But he couldn't have known about the acci-

dent. I parked the Rover beside the Bristol and went up to the office.

Max was talking to Nancy, perched on the corner of her desk and wearing a new leather coat that must have cost as much as I spent on clothes in a year. I had always suspected Nancy disliked him but he was smiling down at her and his charm was having its usual effect, as I came in she laughed.

Nancy was thirty-four and had been my father's secretary for years. She had light brown hair she wore short and a no-nonsense manner. She could be surprisingly tough when circumstances demanded it and one or two of the younger girls were half-afraid of her. I didn't know what I would have done without Nancy and didn't care to think. But at the same time I knew it was a mutual dependence, she wouldn't have known what to do without Bruces. The aunt who had brought her up had died years ago and as far as I knew she had no relatives but she never gave any sign of loneliness. If a man had made a pass at her she would probably have dealt with it with the same calm efficiency she showed in her work. Nancy was a very self-sufficient woman.

'Hallo, Neil.' Max made no move to stand up or shake hands but his eyebrows rose slightly. 'I thought I'd find you here beavering away. A bit late this morning, aren't you?'

It was five past nine and I knew for a fact he hardly ever got to his own office before nine-forty-

five. I bit back an angry retort and took off the sheepskin jacket I had bought five years ago. It was shabby, anyway; beside Max's coat it looked ready for a jumble sale.

'There was an accident at Finlays last night,' I told him shortly, angry with myself for feeling I had to explain. I didn't need to justify myself to Max and I suspected he would mark it up as a point scored that I had done so. He always gave me that feeling. Always had done, ever since I was a kid.

'Oh?' His eyebrows rose again.

I looked at Nancy. I knew she would be upset.

'Bob Gurney was killed. I've been to tell his wife.'

'Oh no!' Nancy murmured.

To give him his due, Max looked shocked. More shocked than I would have expected but I was prejudiced. Even I had to acknowledge his charm and nearly everybody liked him. My feelings were rooted in my childhood, they might be irrational, unfair even, but I couldn't help them. Maybe it was partly envy because I knew I would never have that easy charm myself.

'Good God!' he exclaimed. 'What happened?'

'One of the tower scaffolds collapsed. He was trapped underneath it.'

Nancy was looking at Max, not me. As if she judged he was the stronger character. Or perhaps she wanted to see how he would react.

'What made it collapse?' he asked.

'Ted Everett reckons it wasn't secured properly. It turned right over.'

'That means somebody was careless when they put it up.'

'I suppose so.'

'Gurney. I remember Dad talking about him. He'd been here a long time, hadn't he?'

'Right from the beginning.'

Max nodded sombrely. Then, in a different tone he went on, 'I just looked in to see how things were. I have to keep an eye on my investment.' He grinned.

'We're all right.'

'I'm sure you are. Stella sends her love. She says it's ages since we saw you and I'm to insist you come over for dinner soon.'

'I'm pretty busy just now,' I told him ungraciously. Dinner with Max and his wife was a pleasure I was only too willing to forego.

'There's no rush, any day soon.' He stood up. At six feet one he was five inches taller than I was. 'I must be off, I've a meeting with an Arab prince at the Dorchester at eleven. There's a chance of a big deal and I've a feeling I'm going to pull it off. Paris this afternoon and back tomorrow. You don't know how lucky you are, Neil. No pressure here.'

I didn't miss the patronizing tone. He hadn't intended me to, but if he thought I envied him he was mistaken.

'No,' I agreed. I doubt if he suspected the irony.

He swooped quickly and efficiently on Nancy, landing a kiss on her cheek before she had time to take evasive action. She snorted and went rather pink but I had a feeling she wasn't too displeased.

'Don't forget what I told you,' he said. ''Bye, Neil.'

He departed in a haze of after-shave and self-satisfaction.

'What did he mean by that?' I asked.

'It was something he said before you came in.' Nancy had already sorted the morning's post into four neat little piles, now she started checking the envelopes to ensure there was nothing left in any of them. 'He laughed and told me he'd give me a job when Bruces went bust.'

'Damn him!' I said, making no attempt to hide my anger. Max had caught me on the raw as usual this morning. 'I wonder why he really came.'

'Perhaps he just thought he'd drop in like he said.' Nancy still looked disconcerted.

'Max?'

'All right, perhaps he wanted you to know about the Arab deal.'

That was more likely. Max rarely did anything without a good reason and he would have jumped at the chance of showing me yet again what a success he was. I suspected there were times when he consciously behaved like a tycoon in some television series.

Probably that was why he had pressed me to go to

dinner, I didn't believe it had been Stella's idea. I was equally sure she hadn't sent her love. Stella was Max's second wife, his first, Celia, had divorced him five years ago. She was tall, smart and very cool. Anyone who was not successful according to her lights she ignored or treated with contemptuous indifference. I disliked her and I was certain she disliked me. Max had probably taken it for granted I would decline the invitation. That would have been another point to him, he had made a gesture and I had rebuffed him. Max enjoyed manoeuvres like that.

'Where's Wally?' I asked.

'In his office, I think.' Nancy swept the envelopes together and deposited them in her wastepaper basket.

Wally Thompson and my mother were Bruces' other directors. He had come to the firm as a lad when my father started it; now Bob Gurney was dead he was the only one of the original work force left. Six years ago my father had given him five per cent of the shares and made him a director. Give Wally a technical problem and the odds were he would come up with an answer, he was a first rate technician but very cautious. And you couldn't hurry him. It was probably a good thing we were so different, though I was learning to curb my impetuosity I was still inclined to charge ahead if something seemed to be a good idea. Wally looked after the planning of jobs and the day-to-day tech-

nical side of the business, I took care of sales, finance and administration. On the whole it worked pretty well.

I knew how much Bob Gurney's death would distress him but he didn't say much. He never did. Tell him the firm was bankrupt and he would probably remark that he had better look for another job then. That was another difference between us.

'How's Vera taking it?' he asked.

'Pretty well.'

'Yes, she would. She's a good sort.' That was high praise from him.

'We'll do what we can,' I said.

He nodded.

I went back to Nancy's desk, picked up the letters she had put on one side for me and took them into my office. It was a small room with a window high up in the wall, bitterly cold in winter because the window and door didn't fit properly and I had never got round to doing anything about them. In summer it was almost unbearably hot. Max regarded it with amused contempt, his office was on the fifth floor of a modern block in Finchley with lifts, thick carpets and central heating, but in its way it suited me. When it became too cold I just turned the ancient electric heater up full. Summer was more difficult.

The top letter was from the bank. It was brief and to the point. Hadley, the manager, didn't waste words any more than Wally. He wrote that he had

noticed the company's account was overdrawn £47,786 against the limit he had agreed of £45,000. He had no doubt I would be paying in to correct the position but in the meantime he thought I would want to know the present balance.

He was wrong. It was the third similar letter I had received from him in the last two months and I would have been happier not to know. Things would sort themselves out eventually. They had to. Or so I hoped. Most firms were having the same problem.

The company had been short of cash ever since my father died. He was by no means a wealthy man but he had built up a successful business by his own ability and hard work and he saw no reason why he and my mother should not live well on the results. He had drawn out too much from the company so that now it was under-capitalized. With inflation and difficult trading conditions everywhere there hadn't been enough in the way of profits to plough back. And I hadn't any cash I could put in.

My father hadn't expected to die at sixty-four. I doubt if he had really considered the possibility of his dying at all, except in an abstract way. But he had made a will. Because Max had successful businesses of his own, he was left fifteen per cent of the shares in Bruces and a third of the residual estate. I received sixty per cent of the shares and one thousand pounds. Apart from a few small legacies, everything else had gone to my mother with my

father's expressed wish that she wouldn't dispose of her shares in the company.

At the time it seemed fair enough. To me, at least. But the company had little in the way of cash resources and capital transfer tax bit into the estate. Even so, Max's resentment surprised me. After all, he had never shown much interest in Bruces while my father was alive. He didn't care about the nuts and bolts, wheeling and dealing was more in his line. He called it vision, perhaps he was right.

There had been a time when I felt an occasional pang of guilt. Simply because of the difference in our ages I had always had a better deal than Max. Or so he thought. And he didn't try to hide it. Our father hadn't deliberately discriminated between us, it was just that by the time I was eleven or twelve he was much better off financially than when Max was the same age. So while Max attended the local grammar, I was sent to a minor public school that was no better educationally or anyhow else but possessed the social cachet Max valued and which didn't matter a damn to me. Then to university. Max resented it more because he regarded himself as by far the brainier of us.

Just after the funeral he had made me an offer for my shares. At first I thought he was joking; when I realized he was in earnest I was taken aback. It had never occurred to me he might want to run Bruces and I answered more brusquely than I intended. He nodded but I saw his lips tighten and I knew he was

angry. Max had never liked being thwarted, even in trivial things.

A year ago my mother had had her first heart attack and since then she had lived in a nursing home. Her income was nothing like sufficient to meet the bills and although Max could have helped, I wasn't going to ask him and he didn't offer. I drew the money out of the company in directors' fees, straining its resources more than ever, and although last year it had made its highest profit, it still hadn't been enough.

Then, six months ago the man who owned the freehold of the works had offered it to us. The price was more than fair but still I was reluctant to commit Bruces so far; it meant borrowing heavily from the bank, mortgaging the company's profits for years ahead. Max had persuaded me. It would give us security and strengthen the balance sheet, he said. Property prices were already beginning to rise again, now was the time to buy. I knew he was probably right but still I was worried.

I looked at Hadley's letter again. It had been lying on top of the pile while he was sitting on the corner of Nancy's desk; I wondered if he had seen it. If he had, the odds were that he had read it, 'Private and Confidential' typed across the top wouldn't have stopped him.

No doubt the envelope had been similarly marked but Nancy opened all our letters except the few marked 'Personal'. I didn't blame her but it

irritated me that Max probably knew the state of the account. It would feed his contempt and that was something I could do without.

I walked over to the door. Nancy was typing.

'Did Max see my letters?' I asked her.

'I don't think so.' She sounded surprised.

'He was sitting on your desk.'

She hesitated. 'I suppose he could have done,' she admitted reluctantly.

I told myself I was making too much of it. It didn't really matter if Max knew the account was over the limit, it was only my pride that was hurt.

I went back to my desk and asked Valerie, our telephonist, to get me Ned Excell at the insurance brokers. While I waited I glanced at the other letters. The first was from an architect confirming a change in the starting date for a job, the next from one of our suppliers advertising a new line they were marketing. I couldn't see that it would be of any interest to us. Then Valerie rang to say Ned Excell was on the line.

He was helpful as always and promised to come out to see me at three that afternoon. I thanked him and rang Finlays to explain what had happened. They were sympathetic. After that I got on with the day's normal work.

During the morning the lorry arrived with the remains of the scaffold tower. I went down and watched the men stack it in a corner of the stores. They didn't say much.

An hour later an inspector came from the Department of Employment's Health and Safety Executive, a stocky, middle-aged man named Emery.

'One of your people was here a month ago,' I told him.

'Oh?' He didn't sound very interested. 'I understand you had an accident at one of your sites last night.'

'Yes, one of our men was killed.'

'That's why I'm here, Mr Bruce.' His tone was sympathetic but businesslike.

I took him down to the stores and showed him the broken member.

'It's a pity this lot was moved,' he commented.

'We couldn't very well leave it there, it was blocking the assembly line. Anyway, the police had examined it.'

He grunted non-commitally. I realized he wanted me to leave him and went back to my office.

It was some time before he rejoined me and when he did I couldn't tell if he was satisfied or not, though I couldn't see why he shouldn't be. What had happened was tragic but hardly mysterious.

'There'll be an inquest, of course,' he said.

'I suppose so.'

He nodded. 'Well, thank you, Mr Bruce. I'll be making my report.'

That was all. We shook hands and he left.

Ned arrived punctually at three with all the papers and together we prepared the insurance

claim. Soon after he departed Max rang to say he had spoken to Stella and she wanted to know if I could go to dinner that evening.

'Sorry,' I told him, 'I've got a meeting.' It was only the rugger club committee, I hadn't been looking forward to going after what had happened today and I could have skipped it, now I was thankful for a legitimate excuse for saying 'No'. I wondered why Stella was so pressing. If it was Stella.

'You'll be too late to come for drinks afterwards, I suppose?' Max said.

'I'm afraid so.'

'Pity. All right, another time.'

As I replaced the 'phone it occurred to me that he hadn't sounded too sorry.

The snow started just as the men were leaving. I had been intent on the letters Nancy had brought me to sign and I didn't notice it until she came back to collect them and announced, 'It's snowing,' in the tone with which adults usually greet the first snow of the winter, part depressed, part exhilarated, as if the childhood wonder hasn't been quite ousted by the knowledge of the mess and inconvenience it will bring. The flakes were drifting slowly past the window.

'It won't be much,' I told her confidently.

'I hope not.'

She took the letters and went out. I cleared the things off my desk, locked the drawer and followed

her. She was putting on her coat in the passage. It was like her, practical, without any pretensions to style. I wondered if she was ever lonely in the little semi-detached house her aunt had left her. If the cool, efficient mask ever slipped when she was by herself. She never talked about her life away from the office.

'Goodnight,' she said briskly.

'Goodnight, Nancy.'

I watched her pick up her handbag, then the letters. We were both alone in the world, probably both lonely, if we were prepared to admit it, and she wasn't unattractive in a diffident, unobtrusive way. Yet I felt nothing for her but respect and the near-affection that almost inevitably grows for someone you like and see a lot of. I took it for granted she felt the same about me. But I guessed that if I suggested we go out for a meal together she would stare in astonishment and decline, politely but firmly.

Or would she? Perhaps one day I would try it and see.

She would lock the main door at the foot of the stairs. I went up to the flat by the other one that led on to the landing at the top of the first flight. The living-room struck as cold as it had done twelve hours ago. I lit the fire, got myself a frugal tea and read until it was time to go to the meeting.

After the accident I had decided to resign from the club, I would never be able to play again and I

didn't fancy the prospect of going to matches and listening to the talk and laughter in the bar afterwards, it would be too like turning the knife in the wound. I was gloomily convinced I would be an embarrassment to myself and the people who knew me. It was my mother who persuaded me to change my mind.

The committee always met at the White Lion, a half-timbered hotel on the corner of High Street. It was only a few hundred yards from the flat so I walked and usually it was past eleven by the time I got home. This evening there wasn't much business to discuss and several of the members weren't there. Still feeling depressed after the day's events, I wasn't in the mood for a long session in the bar afterwards, however congenial the company. I had a quick pint and left early.

It was still a few minutes to ten when I turned in at the yard entrance and saw a light burning in the stores. I walked over, taking care not to slip on the snow; my bad leg made me as cautious as an old woman when the going was treacherous. It wasn't only that falling was apt to be painful and I was afraid of damaging the fragile limb again, getting up presented problems.

The door was unlocked. I made a mental note to have a word with Joe Preston in the morning and stepped inside to reach the switch.

The stores occupied all the ground floor of the two storied wing on that side of the yard with part of

the offices above them. We didn't hold much stock, most of our materials were delivered direct to the sites by our suppliers, and there was a good deal more room than we really needed. Half the area was occupied by well spaced racks of shelving, the rest was used for storing larger pieces of equipment.

I saw the wreckage of the scaffold tower in a corner and walked over to look at it. It was just a heap of twisted steel, no good for anything but scrap. I supposed I would have to do something about disposing of it.

There was a movement behind me and I started to turn.

Too late. Something heavy crashed on the back of my head and I pitched forward.

When I came to I was lying face down across the wreckage. It was very dark and my head ached abominably. My leg too; I must have twisted it when I fell. I touched the back of my head gingerly. A lump was coming up already and I could feel some dried blood but it didn't seem to be very much. I pushed myself upright and waited for my eyes to become accustomed to the darkness.

It was no good, it was too intense. The stores had no windows and any light that came in round the edges of the doors was blotted out by the shelves. I had given up smoking while I was in hospital and never started again so I had no matches or lighter with me. I reached out sideways and my left hand

touched a shelf, if I followed that it should lead me to within a few feet of the switch.

It took me an absurdly long time to cover that dozen yards or so. I was as weak as a kitten and my leg hurt more when I put my right foot to the ground. But the racks were solid and I leaned my weight on them, half dragging myself along.

At last when I reached forward my hand encountered nothing but air. I reckoned that if I had followed the right row the switch should be directly in front of me, about six feet away. I shuffled forward, hands outstretched, thinking that this must be what it was like to be blind. My groping fingers touched the wall, then the switch and I pressed it down.

After the almost tangible darkness the light was so bright I had to close my eyes. When I opened them again I stood for a few seconds, waiting for a little strength to seep back into my legs before I opened the door.

A good deal of snow had fallen during the evening and the footprints the men had left when they went home were covered an inch deep. Mine were still firm, the packed snow slightly glazed in the moonlight. Beside them were two other tracks, one almost superimposed on the first. Someone had walked in from the street, then returned. A man's prints but smaller than mine. And my shoes were size eight.

I went up to the flat, wondering whether to call

the police. There didn't seem much point, if the intruder had taken anything it was only a few small tools. I made myself some coffee, black and strong, took a couple of aspirins and sat down in the only easychair in front of the fire.

It wasn't until later, when I was getting into bed, that I remembered the door of the stores hadn't been forced.

The key hung on a nail just inside the door all day. When he left work, Joe Preston locked up and took it home with him. For some reason he didn't carry it about with him during the day. The next morning he came to tell me that when he arrived he had found the door unlocked.

'I know,' I told him.

'I locked up last night,' he said, bewildered.

'Has anyone borrowed the key lately, Joe?'

He thought for a moment, his broad forehead furrowed, then he shook his head. 'Not as I can remember.'

'You haven't noticed it missing?'

'No, sir.'

'Somebody let themselves in last night,' I told him.

He swore. 'Boys, you reckon?'

'They didn't have to break in, Joe.'

He was no fool, he saw the implications all right.

'Are you saying—' he began, resentment mixing with wonder.

'Of course I'm not.' I grinned and looked down at his feet. For size, at least, they wouldn't have disgraced an old-time bobby. 'What size shoes do you take?'

'Elevens.' He still sounded uncertain.

'This chap took more like sixes.'

Whoever he was, it wouldn't have been difficult for him to remove the key for long enough to get a duplicate cut, I thought. The odds against anyone noticing it was missing were pretty long. By the time Joe Preston came to lock up it would be back on the nail.

Which almost certainly meant that the man who had coshed me worked for Bruces.

'You might have a look to see if you can spot anything missing,' I said. 'It's not worth spending much time on it. And you'd better change the lock and keep the key on you all the time in future.'

He nodded and departed.

About eleven he returned to report that as far as he could see nothing had been taken. It looked as if, having laid me out, the intruder had lost his nerve and fled empty-handed.

CHAPTER THREE

A week later I received a letter from one of our suppliers. It was polite but explicit, our account had been outstanding nine weeks and they would be obliged if we would settle it forthwith. Just polite. It was signed 'F. J. Lambert, Financial Controller.'

I was angry and humiliated; we had dealt with Comfords for twenty years, our terms were two months credit and they had never pressed us for payment before.

I picked up the telephone and asked Valerie to get me Tom Needham, their sales manager.

'I've a letter from your people,' I told him when he came on the line.

'Oh?' Was it my imagination or did he sound guarded?

'They want us to settle our account. At once.'

'Times aren't easy, Neil.' He was apologetic, conciliatory. 'You know how it is.'

'We've dealt with you for twenty years and now we're a week over the two months. It's been longer than that in the past and you haven't worried.'

'I know. I'm sorry.'

'I'm damned sure you've other customers more overdue than we are.' I was angry and I didn't care

if he knew it. 'Are you chasing them?'

'Look, it's not my department, Neil. Everybody's tightening up.' He hesitated. 'I shan't be able to give you the same terms again.'

'What do you mean?'

'It's got to be payment on invoice in future.'

I was astounded. 'Look—' I began.

'I'm sorry, Neil. Really.'

'After twenty years? Don't Comfords want any business?'

'There's nothing I can do about it.'

Suddenly I realized, that was why he sounded embarrassed.

'Are you doing the same to everybody?' I demanded.

'I said, I'm sorry.'

'What the hell is all this?'

'You want me to spell it out?'

'Yes.' I knew I was asking for further humiliation but I didn't care. I knew, too, that there was no basis for it.

'I hoped you wouldn't,' Needham said. 'You're having a bad time, aren't you?'

'What do you mean?'

'The word's going round.'

I didn't believe it. But Needham wasn't making excuses now, he was warning me.

'We're not in trouble,' I said. 'Nobody's having it easy just now, you said so yourself. We're no worse than anyone else.'

'Good. I'm glad.'

'Don't you believe me?'

'Of course I do. But I'm not the one who counts. And we're having to be careful.'

'Who told you?' I demanded.

I could imagine him half shrugging. 'You know how it is, stories get passed on.'

'If that's how you feel, we'll go somewhere else,' I told him. I was furious, not with him but with whoever had started the insidious rumour. I knew only too well that once stories like that started it was almost impossible to stop them, the more you protested the more they were accepted. And then a firm could really be in trouble.

'You may not find it all that easy,' he said quietly. It wasn't a threat, he had meant it when he said he was sorry.

'We'll see.' I slammed the 'phone back on its rest. I liked Needham and I knew he hadn't enjoyed telling me. And if what he had said was true he was almost certainly right, other firms wouldn't fall over each other to let us have credit. In our industry, with long delays before customers paid, credit was essential, without it you needed far more cash than we had available.

I buzzed Joyce Redding, our cashier, and asked her to bring me a list of customers whose accounts were overdue. She came in less than five minutes, a buxom, capable woman of fifty with curly hair and a cheery manner.

There were seven accounts on the list, two of them more than a month overdue. In all they totalled more than ten thousand pounds. I knew it was my fault, I should have done something about them before but I had been busy and I had let it slip. A lot of our work was done for public boards and local authorities and according to the contracts payment was due fourteen days after the architect certified the work was done. In practice it was often a good deal longer.

'Is there anything in today?' I asked.

'Four hundred pounds from Raglans and eleven hundred from Smiths,' Joyce answered.

'What's the overdraft in our books?'

'Forty-nine thousand, one hundred and twelve. That's before I've posted today's.'

Say £47,600. But not all the cheques we had sent out would have been presented yet.

I asked Joyce to let me have a list of the most pressing accounts we ought to settle within the next few days and she went out, closing the door behind her. I studied the list she had left me. I would ring the people on it but even if they posted cheques within the next day or two, with the weekend it could still be nearly a week before they arrived and we owed Comfords over £4,000. Part of it was last month's account and not due yet but we had to find £2,600 quickly. Even that wouldn't guarantee us further supplies and we had a big new job due to start next week. Hell! I thought.

The infuriating thing was that we weren't really in trouble, if the company was wound up today there would be more than enough to pay all its debts. A lot more than enough. Only most of it was tied up in the property and equipment and what we needed now was cash.

Somebody had started a rumour that Bruces was in difficulties. Who? And why? It sometimes happened that if you disputed an account or were late paying it the creditor, disgruntled and perhaps near the danger line himself, started wondering if you were playing for time because you weren't in a position to pay. Said so to other people.

Nine times out of ten that was the end of it. This was different, Comfords were a sound firm and they had known us a long time, they wouldn't demand cash in future on the strength of a vague rumour. Whatever they had heard, it went deeper, was more worrying than that.

I rang Hadley at the bank and he said he could see me at eleven-thirty. There was an Association lunch at Bedford at one, I should just about make it.

I had barely replaced the 'phone when Nancy rang to say a Mr Forsyth was asking for me.

The name meant nothing to me. 'What does he want?' I asked.

'He's from the Department of Employment.'

It was probably something about a return we hadn't submitted in time. I didn't want to be bothered with things like that now, I had more

important problems on my mind.

'Ask Helen to see him,' I said. Helen Foster, as well as being Wally's secretary, dealt with routine staff matters.

I put the 'phone down. Two seconds later it rang again.

'He wants to see you,' Nancy said.

I swore under my breath. 'All right,' I agreed, 'show him in.'

Forsyth was about fifty, a tall, lean man with a prominent jaw, thinning hair and eyes that held about as much expression as two marbles.

'Mr Bruce?' His voice was flat with a trace of the Midlands in it.

'Yes.' We shook hands. 'Won't you sit down?'

'Thank you.' He leaned back and crossed his legs, holding his briefcase on his lap. 'I'm an inspector employed by the Health and Safety Executive.'

'Oh no!' I ejaculated. I couldn't believe it, not again so soon.

'I'm sorry?'

Forsyth frowned and I could have kicked myself. It had sounded as if I had something to hide. But he must be used to welcomes that were less than enthusiastic.

'It's the third time you people have been here in the last six weeks,' I told him.

'We're authorized to visit premises like yours at any time.' He permitted himself a thin smile. 'We

don't make appointments, you know.'

'No,' I agreed.

'If I could have a look round?'

'Yes, of course.' We both stood up. 'Has this anything to do with the accident?'

'Accident?' He sounded surprised.

'Some scaffolding collapsed at one of our sites last week and one of our men was killed. That was why your chap came then.'

'I'm afraid I can't tell you anything about that, this is purely a routine inspection.'

Like hell it is, I thought. But he probably didn't care if I believed him.

I held the door open and watched him walk down the passage to the stairs, then I went back to my desk and tried to concentrate on my own work. Normally I accepted the inspectors' visits as a fact of life, they had a job to do and they did it as reasonably and as pleasantly as they could, but now I was in a mood to doubt everything. And everybody. I had an uneasy suspicion that Forsyth's visit was part of something I didn't understand.

So many things had happened lately.

I picked up Joyce Redding's list again. Of the customers whose accounts had been outstanding longest one was a public authority and another a property company; we had been wiring a new office block for them. I decided the authority was a better bet and asked Valerie to see if she could get me the chief engineer.

He was surprised to hear from me, usually he dealt with Wally Thompson. When I explained that their account was more than a month overdue and if we didn't get a cheque within the next seven days we should have to take our men off the site he was apologetic and promised to talk to the treasurer. I knew he would do what he could, he wouldn't want the work held up and payment wasn't his problem.

The property company was a different matter. The telephonist put me through to a secretary who said she was sorry but the only people who could authorize payment were away on business or sick. Like a lot of other people, I had heard that one so often it wasn't even a joke any more. But the job was finished and short of starting legal proceedings there wasn't much we could do. They had us at a disadvantage and they knew it. Proceedings would take time and that was something we hadn't got.

It was no use my losing my temper with the secretary, she was only doing what she had been told. I asked her to pass on my message to whoever returned first and hung up.

By the time I had rung the other firms on the list I calculated that with any luck we ought to receive five or six thousand pounds within the next week or two. It wasn't enough or quickly enough but there would be the usual monthly cheques coming in as well. I told Joyce I was going to the bank and she brought me the other list I wanted with the paying in book and the cheques that had come in the post.

The list didn't do much to cheer me, with Comfords' £2,600 we had to pay nearly £5,000 within the next week or so.

Hadley was sympathetic. He had been at the branch for years and he knew the company was basically sound. Moreover it was unlikely he had heard the rumours, so far they seemed to be restricted to the industry. How long that state of affairs would continue, I didn't like to think. I showed him the two lists and explained our problem.

He listened attentively, then flicked over the pages of a computer print out. 'You're within the limit today.'

'There must be some cheques that haven't come through,' I told him, 'it's forty-seven and a half in our cash book.'

'How much more do you need?'

I would have liked to pay all our accounts that day, it would have been the most effective way of putting an end to the stories, but I knew it wasn't on.

'It could go up to fifty thousand for a few days,' I said. 'I don't think it will but it's possible. Then some of the money will start coming in.'

He hesitated. 'All right, fifty thousand. But it's got to be back inside the limit within fourteen days.'

'Thanks,' I said. I didn't draw too deep a sigh of relief in case he thought I was holding something back.

We stood up and he came to the door. His hand on the knob he asked, 'How's your mother?'

'About the same.'

'Remember me to her.'

I promised I would and left the bank feeling a good deal more cheerful than when I entered it. One of the cashiers, a pretty girl of about twenty, gave me a brilliant smile. That helped.

Forsyth had moved on to the workshop by the time I got back. I asked him if he could spare me a minute and he followed me outside.

'I know you don't have to tell me anything,' I said, 'but I'd appreciate it if you'd tell me why you're really here.'

He regarded me steadily, his features as expressionless as before. 'I told you, Mr Bruce, it's just a routine inspection.'

'Three times within six weeks?'

He didn't reply to that and I bit back a sarcastic remark. Routine, hell. If his department had time to visit a small firm like ours which used very little machinery and had a clean record three times so quickly they were over-staffed. But I knew it would do more harm than good to antagonize him.

'Have you found anything?' I asked.

He paused before he answered. Then all he said was, 'I'll be making a report. There are one or two minor things.'

'Oh?'

He listed them. There were three and minor was

hardly the word, even he couldn't consider the most serious of them anything more than trivial.

'That's all?'

'Did you expect me to find anything else?'

I smiled wrily. 'No.'

The cool way he looked at me was more disconcerting than it should have been. I thanked him and went up to my office.

CHAPTER FOUR

I went to the lunch alone; Wally never attended Association meetings, he said they weren't his cup of tea. I knew what he meant and wished he didn't but he had never wholly reconciled himself to being a director. They weren't my cup of tea either, particularly, but sometimes I saw friends there I wouldn't meet otherwise and I clung to a vague notion that one day going might prove useful.

I was late leaving the office and inevitably there was a lot of traffic. On top of that, at one point on the road there was single line working for a quarter of a mile. I kicked myself for not taking the motorway and arrived feeling frustrated and irritable.

But if I was late, lunch was later and when I entered the bar it was still crowded. I nodded greetings to one or two men I knew and worked my way to the counter to order a half of bitter. It wasn't very good beer but when I had drunk half of it I began to feel calmer.

I knew most of the men in the room by sight, probably a dozen of them reasonably well. One or two were friends. I wondered if they had heard the rumours.

There was a small group standing beside me. One

of them, a tall man of my own age, turned, saw me and said 'Hallo.'

I had met Roger Peters at some Association function a couple of years ago and we had become friends in a casual way although as his firm was based thirty miles from Albridge we met only occasionally. Seeing that I was alone he drew me a little away from the crowd.

'How's life?' he enquired.

Did I imagine it was more than a casual question? I told myself I was becoming too touchy, reading significance into everything.

'Bloody awful,' I answered with feeling.

'Oh? Sorry about that.' His tone was carefully non-commital, just this side of concerned.

I grinned. 'I was late leaving and I got held up on the way here.'

'Oh, I see.' He smiled back, his relief all too clear. So he had heard.

'How are things with you?'

'Not so bad. They could be better.'

'They always could.'

'You're right there.' He was still embarrassed and afraid of saying the wrong thing.

'If everyone paid on time it would make life a lot easier,' I remarked.

'You can say that again.'

But he didn't have to worry. Not unless things had gone very badly wrong. His father was a wealthy man, a director of two or three fairly sub-

stantial companies, and the electrical business was part of a group with plenty of financial backing behind it.

'How do you find suppliers?' I asked.

'All right. Why?'

'Some of them seem to be having problems.'

'I daresay they are.' He finished his drink. 'Have another?'

'Not now, thanks.' I rationed myself on these occasions, it was only too easy to let the drinks keep coming and I couldn't afford to lose my licence. Apart from anything else, I hadn't anybody to act as chauffeur.

'Sure?' Roger said.

'All right then, I'll have a tomato juice. Thanks.'

'I'd better have the same.' He grinned. Roger still played in his club's first fifteen and I knew from experience he wasn't always so careful.

Before he had succeeded in attracting the barman's attention there was a shout that lunch was being served and we went through into the big room. Roger and I sat together. I had a man I didn't know on my other side and an old friend of my father's facing me. Walter Jones was over seventy now and rather deaf.

We were having our soup when he leaned across and said loudly, 'Sorry to hear you're having a bad time. I expect it'll turn out all right, eh?' He probably thought he was whispering but they must have heard him at the other end of the table.

I felt myself reddening.

'What do you mean?' I asked him as calmly as I could. Beside me Roger was studying his soup too attentively.

'You're having problems, aren't you?'

'No more than most people. Less, probably.' I almost shouted it, more for the benefit of the rest of them there than for his.

'Oh, sorry.' He was beginning to look awkward himself.

'Who told you we were?'

He dithered. 'Can't remember. You know how it is. Somebody said something the other day. Glad it isn't true.'

'As a matter of fact we did very well last year,' I told him.

He grunted, turned to his neighbour on his left and began talking about Bedford rugby. People along the table who had been looking at us resumed their conversations. I was angry. It was as though I had some contagious disease. Maybe that was how it seemed to them, some of them were probably on the brink of disaster themselves and having somebody in their midst they thought had already slipped over the brink made matters worse.

I didn't delude myself my denial would have convinced them or stop the rumours. Maybe it would have been better if I hadn't come.

'Read any good books lately?' Roger enquired in a low voice. He was smiling and I began to feel

slightly more cheerful. His cheery good humour was what I needed just now.

'Only bills and bank statements,' I told him.

'I can't stand that heavy stuff. Have some more wine?'

'We did have a record year last year,' I said defensively. 'We've plenty of work in hand.'

He glanced across at old Jones. 'With friends like that who needs enemies?'

Roger poured the wine and started telling me about the difficulties his firm was having with a contract in London. The main contractor's men had gone on strike and the whole job was weeks behind schedule. He probably thought it would make me feel better to hear about somebody else's troubles.

When the lunch was over he suggested we go into the lounge for more coffee and a brandy.

'I've got to wait for Jenny,' he explained, 'she's borrowed my car.'

I wondered idly who Jenny was, his secretary or a girl friend? Roger usually had two or three in tow, girls liked him. I agreed to the coffee, said I didn't want a brandy and went into the lounge while he departed in the direction of the toilets. A waiter came and took my order and I leaned back in the deep armchair and waited for Roger. It seemed as if it was the first opportunity I had had to really relax for days. I had been too tense lately.

'Sorry I'm late, pet.'

The girl's voice just behind me was low, slightly

husky. Before I had time to turn a soft cheek touched mine and lips brushed my skin. I looked round then.

'So am I,' I agreed. It was cheap but I couldn't resist it.

She was about twenty-six with a face too broad for real beauty but strikingly attractive. Her nose was short and she had big brown eyes under delicately arched brows. Just now those eyes were sparking anger. She was wearing a pale suede coat trimmed with fur and beautifully cut fawn trousers. Dark hair showed under the fur that trimmed her suede hat.

'I beg your pardon,' she said coolly, 'I thought you were somebody else.'

Considering that she had just kissed me, that seemed to me to display a fair degree of self-possession. I guessed that although she would have liked me to think it was directed at me, her anger was really at herself.

I grinned.

She looked daggers at me and stalked over to a chair some distance away, picked up a magazine and sat down with her back turned.

Roger came in then. He had sat down before he noticed the girl, when he did he exclaimed, 'Jenny!'

She looked up. 'Oh, there you are, Roger.' She studiously avoided my eye.

'Come over here. You haven't met Neil Bruce, have you?'

She came. She had to look at me now. Her eyes were wary.

'No,' she said, daring me to deny it. 'Hallo.'

Hardly encouraging. Not a secretary, I decided. Lucky Roger.

The waiter brought our coffee and Roger's brandy.

'Will you have some?' I asked Jenny.

'Thank you.'

'And something with it?'

'No, thank you.' Her tone was still cool.

I asked the waiter to bring another cup.

'Did you get it all right?' Roger asked Jenny.

'Yes.'

I wondered what 'it' was without really caring. Then the waiter returned with the cup. Jenny poured.

'Have you been to the lunch too?' she asked me, thawing a little.

'Yes.'

'Neil has a company in Albridge,' Roger told her.

'I love Albridge.' Definitely thawing. Suddenly she caught my eye and laughed, a delicious low, musical sound.

Roger looked at her in surprise, then at me.

'It's all right,' she assured him.

He gulped the rest of his coffee, then his brandy and stood up.

'I must go, I've some people coming at half-past,' he said.

'I haven't finished my coffee,' Jenny protested.

Roger looked at me. 'You'll take her home, won't you, Neil?'

'With pleasure,' I agreed. It seemed a pretty cavalier way to treat a girl friend, especially one as desirable as Jenny but perhaps she was used to it.

She looked doubtful. 'Are you sure?'

'Of course.'

'It's very kind of you.'

'It's the least I can do,' I told her, 'in the circumstances.'

She didn't try to stop the smile.

'That's okay then,' Roger said complacently. 'See you some time, Neil.'

He put two pounds on the tray and strode away towards the door before I had time to protest. I wondered how Jenny could possibly have mistaken me for him, he was a good four inches taller, then realized we were both dark and wearing similar suits and all she had been able to see of me had been the top of my head. There had been no one else in the lounge but an elderly couple.

'Does he treat all his girl friends like that?' I asked, amused.

Jenny stared at me. Then she laughed. 'I wouldn't know,' she said. 'I'm not a girl friend, I'm his sister. Didn't he tell you?'

'No.'

'I take it you haven't any sisters?'

'No,' I said again.

'That explains it. You took a chance, didn't you?'

'How?'

'You didn't know where I lived. It might have been miles away.'

I hadn't even considered that, I was too pleased at the prospect of spending a little longer with her.

'I trusted Roger,' I told her.

'Oh, I see.' She made a little moue.

'Where do you live?'

'Four miles out. But if you drop me in the town I can get a bus. It's right out of your way if you're going back to Albridge.'

'That's all right,' I said. 'I'll stick to my bargain.'

We walked out of the hotel and round to the car park at the back. I had always walked fast, as a small boy my father had expected me to keep pace with his long strides, and although now I limped a bit that didn't make much difference. These last four years I had got out of the way of adjusting my steps to a girl's and Jenny had to nearly trot to keep up with me.

'Hi!' she protested, laughing.

'I'm sorry.'

'Do you always rush about like this?'

'Usually,' I admitted.

'I'd better buy some running shoes, then.'

I looked at her, startled and absurdly pleased. Her eyes met mine frankly.

'You needn't,' I told her, 'I'll learn in time.'

She smiled. 'Good.'

My four-year-old Rover looked shabby standing by itself in the half-empty car park and I wished I had remembered to clean it last weekend. Or rather, that when I remembered I hadn't decided it wasn't worth the effort. Moreover, there was a hole in the exhaust I hadn't attended to and when I started the engine it boomed lustily.

'I'm sorry about the noise,' I apologized. 'I keep meaning to see about a new exhaust.'

'Mine's worse than this,' Jenny said.

I wondered why she hadn't used her own car today instead of borrowing Roger's and was glad she hadn't.

'It's being serviced,' she explained, as if she had read my thoughts. 'They're supposed to be fitting a new one.'

'I'm glad you decided to have it done today,' I said.

'So am I.' She laughed. 'But we can thank the garage for that, they couldn't do it before.'

I turned out of the car park and on to the main road. The river looked cold and uninviting.

'Left at the next turning,' Jennifer told me.

We didn't talk much until we were clear of the streets. I didn't know Bedford well and I concentrated on following her directions while she sat looking out through the windscreen.

We were driving along a pleasant road on the outskirts of the town when she said suddenly, 'You've a bad leg, haven't you?'

'Yes.'

I was used to people asking. Now, for the first time in a long while I resented what Fate had done to me. I was a cripple and I could guess what that would mean to a girl like Jennifer; she would be sorry for me and that would be it.

'What happened?' No pity, just a matter-of-fact enquiry.

'A car crash. It was a long time ago.'

'Does it give you much trouble?'

I felt myself relaxing again. 'Not really. It aches a bit sometimes. And it makes me awkward.'

She let it go at that.

The Peters' house was Edwardian and large, at least by modern standards. It stood well back from the road, its red brick almost hidden by the leafless skeleton of a Virginia creeper. The drive was bordered by rhododendrons. I pulled up in front of the door and Jennifer climbed out quickly.

'Will you come in and have a drink or a cup of tea?' she asked.

I would have liked to accept but I had to get back to the works.

'I must get back,' I told her. 'Thanks all the same.'

'Well then, thank you for bringing me home.'

'It was a pleasure. Shall I see you again?'

I waited for her to say, 'I expect so,' not meaning it. But she didn't, she said simply, 'Yes, please.'

Then, with a quick 'Goodbye, Neil,' and a smile

she turned and disappeared into the house. The door closed behind her.

I was halfway back to Albridge before I remembered that for the last hour I hadn't even thought about the rumours or cash flows.

CHAPTER FIVE

It was well past five by the time I got back to the office. When I walked in Wally was talking to Nancy and looking more agitated than I had seen him for a long time.

'What's happened?' I asked, looking from one to the other. I had been feeling relaxed and cheerful, now my heart sank.

'One of the lorries has been hi-jacked,' Nancy answered.

'*What*? Which one?'

'Don's.'

'Hell!'

It would be, I thought bitterly. Don Carter had been taking a load of equipment to a site just north of Birmingham. The job was for some new customers, installing specialized plant at their factory, and we had been so keen to get it we had pared our price to the bone. For safety, the plant had been delivered to the works instead of straight to the site, now it looked as if we needn't have bothered. It was insured but already, through no fault of ours, the job was a month behind schedule and what had happened was hardly likely to endear us to the company, already frustrated and under pressure.

'Has it all gone?' I asked.

'The lot.' It seemed to give Wally a perverse satisfaction. 'I don't know what's happening lately, everything seems to be going wrong. First the accident at Finlays, then that inspector nosing round wasting time, now this.'

It was as well he didn't know what had happened in the stores the other evening, I thought. And the rumours somebody was spreading about us.

'Is Don all right?' I asked.

Nancy nodded. 'They've taken him to hospital for a check up, he was coshed, but they don't think anything's broken.'

That was something to be thankful for, at least. About all there was.

'What do the police say?'

'Nothing much,' Wally said.

'Have you told Wilkinsons?'

'Yes. They didn't sound very happy.'

I wasn't surprised, I wouldn't have been if I had been in their place.

'Where did it happen?'

'Just after he'd left the M6. A van pulled across in front of him. He thinks there were three of them. They forced him out, hit him over the head and took the lorry. The police found it a couple of miles away in a ditch.'

'Poor Don,' Nancy said.

Trust a woman to put people first. But she was right.

Wally had calmed down. Probably telling me

about it had helped, he could unload some of the responsibility on to me.

'I'd better get on to Ned Excell,' I said. He wouldn't be exactly delighted either.

I went into my room and rang his office. Valerie had gone home and I had to look up the number. When I got through he had just left but the girl who answered promised she would ask him to ring me in the morning. I put the 'phone down and sat there thinking.

Five minutes later Wally put his head round the door.

'What do you think we should do?' he asked.

'What can we do?'

'I don't know,' he admitted.

Neither did I. I stood up.

'We might as well go home, we've had enough for one day.'

'They say troubles always come in threes.'

Or fours, I thought. Or fives.

We went out into the main office. Wally muttered something and headed for his own room. Nancy was putting on her coat. I felt depressed and restless. Perhaps that was why I said, 'Will you come out for a meal this evening, Nancy?'

She stared at me as if she couldn't believe what she had heard. Just as I had thought the other day she would.

'Do you mean it?'

'Yes. What's so strange about it?'

'You've never asked me before.'

'Well, I am now.'

She turned and picked up her handbag. 'I'm sorry, Neil, I can't.' It sounded almost curt.

I couldn't have embarrassed her, surely? We had known each other too long for that.

'Another time then?'

'Perhaps.' She smiled suddenly. 'Goodnight, Neil.'

'Goodnight,' I said.

When she had gone I went back to my office and spent half an hour working on the cash flow figures, trying to make them look more reassuring than they were. Unless all the customers I had 'phoned this morning kept their word I didn't see how we could meet Hadley's deadline. And I had been in business too long to expect they would.

At six o'clock I shoved the papers away in a drawer and went to see my mother.

The nursing home was a large Victorian house half a mile from the works. My mother had her own room on the first floor and I was allowed to visit her whenever I liked within reason.

The matron came into the hall while I was waiting for the nurse to come back and tell me it was all right for me to go up. She was a buxom woman with unruly blonde hair I was sure she must bleach and a steely eye. The eye was deceptive, she was a kindly soul and if she was a disciplinarian, she kept it for the staff.

'How is she today?' I asked.

Matron hesitated. 'She had a slight turn this afternoon,' she said. 'She's better now but I wouldn't stay too long, she'll still be tired. Two visitors in one day are rather a lot for her.'

'Two?' I echoed, surprised.

'A lady came this afternoon, just before she had her turn. I expect she got a bit excited.'

I frowned. It must have been one of my mother's friends. She had any number but they didn't visit her very often, most of them were elderly and some of them none too fit themselves. Others, I suspected, couldn't face coming to the home even if it wasn't too much like a hospital. I was used to it now but still the place vaguely depressed me, in spite of everything the staff did it had an atmosphere of hopelessness. It reminded me of an old man I knew who, when anyone asked him how he was, would reply, 'Waiting for the end, just waiting for the end.' Because he was noted for his morbid sense of humour they never knew if he was serious or not.

'Do you know who she was?' I asked.

Matron shook her head. 'I didn't know she was here until she was going. She was young, though, I saw that.'

I wondered who it could have been.

'I won't stay long,' I promised.

Matron smiled and bustled away with a rustle of her starched apron. The young nurse who had waited while we were talking came up and said it

was all right for me to go up.

My mother was lying in bed. I had been prepared to find her tired but still I was shocked to see how frail she looked. Her skin was slack and fatigue showed in her eyes. The shadows under them were like dark smudges.

'How are you feeling?' I asked when I had kissed her.

'Oh, I'm fine now, dear.'

'Matron says you weren't too well this afternoon.'

'I got rather tired.' She smiled wanly. 'Wasn't it silly of me?'

'You had a visitor.'

'Yes, Stella came. It was nice of her, wasn't it?'

'Very.'

I wondered why my sister-in-law had come. As far as I knew, she had never done so before and I couldn't imagine that visiting the sick and elderly was much in her line. Moreover, she had never pretended any fondness for my mother.

'What have you been doing today?'

'There was an Association lunch at Bedford.'

'Was it interesting?'

'Not very.'

'I'm glad you keep in touch with other firms. Your father had a lot of friends in the business; friends can be so helpful.'

'I know,' I said, remembering old Jones. But no doubt he had meant well.

'Darling,' my mother said diffidently, 'Stella says Bruces are in some sort of trouble, is that right?'

I felt anger rising inside me. So that was why she had come. And that was why my mother had been so upset afterwards. Trust Stella. No doubt Max had put her up to it.

'No,' I said, trying to keep the bitterness out of my voice, 'it isn't right.'

'I couldn't believe it was.'

'Stella's got hold of some story and put two and two together to make sixty-five.'

'You would tell me if there was anything, wouldn't you?'

'Yes, of course I would,' I lied. 'What did she say?'

'Not much, really. Just that everybody was having a difficult time just now. She was so sorry about the firm but she was sure it was only a temporary thing and you'd be able to get out of it. She was glad Max was all right; she's very proud of him, you know.'

'I know she is.'

I could imagine her saying it, her dark eyes malicious, enjoying every word.

'Why won't you let Max help, dear? Stella said he wanted to.'

'We don't need help.'

'Are you sure?'

'Quite sure, mother.'

'Well, if you really are . . .'

But she didn't sound convinced. She had always had a soft spot for Max, to her it would seem natural to turn to him for help. I knew my dislike of him had always saddened her, she had never seen that it was mutual. Even intelligent people were often blind to the true characters of those they liked and invalids sometimes wanted to delude themselves. My mother had no illusions about Max's feelings for her but she had always ignored them, telling herself they stemmed from a natural resentment because she had taken his own mother's place. Even now he was nearly forty.

I knew that in a way she would rather believe him than me because she knew I might hide the truth to protect her. She probably suspected I was doing so now. Apparently it didn't occur to her that Max might be lying himself.

Gently I led the conversation away from the business and Max. She had a television set in the room and I asked her what she had been watching, then told her about one of her friends I had met in the street yesterday. And I remembered to pass on Hadley's message. That pleased her.

After a quarter of an hour I could see she was tiring, said goodbye and left.

'You will tell me if there's anything wrong, won't you?' she asked as I reached the door. 'I feel so horribly helpless here.'

'Yes, dear.' She smiled but it was a pathetic shadow of the brilliant smile I remembered and I

went out quickly.

Matron was in the hall.

'If that lady who called today comes again, will you make sure she's told my mother isn't well enough to see her?' I asked.

Matron eyed me doubtfully. 'Well . . .'

'She tells her things that aren't true and they upset her,' I explained.

'Oh dear.' Matron nodded. 'Yes, of course I will, Mr Bruce.'

I was still angry and I sat in the Rover for a minute or two before I started the engine and drove back to the flat. It was freezing again.

I lit the gas fire in the living-room before taking off my coat. The remains of the morning's breakfast were still on the table, toast crumbs on one plate, bacon fat congealed on another. I looked at the mess and wondered what the hell it was all for. I was thirty-two and what had I achieved? An unsuccessful marriage, an accident that had killed my wife and partially crippled me, this hole of a flat and a business with problems.

I thought of Jennifer Peters. I could imagine that solid old house, a fire burning cheerfully in the grate, everything comfortable and well ordered. It wasn't a question of money, it was an attitude of mind, and it didn't say much for mine. This flat reeked of loneliness. Yet I hadn't been lonely for a long time before today.

I told myself I was dangerously close to wallow-

ing in self-pity. If anyone had asked me even a fortnight ago I would have told them I enjoyed life. Nothing had changed, so why this sense of desolation now?

But I knew I was deceiving myself, a lot had changed these last two weeks. The business was worrying me for the first time. It had all started with the accident at Finlays and Bob Gurney's death. Now someone was spreading rumours about Bruces being in trouble. They might not be true but if enough people believed them they soon would be. We had always had a good reputation in the industry, now that was in danger.

Then there had been Forsyth's visit this morning. The more I thought about that the more convinced I became that someone had reported we were breaking the safety regulations. It was the only reason I could see for a second 'routine' inspection so soon after the last one and it would explain Forsyth's attitude.

Someone. Was it the same person who had started the rumours? And if so, why?

On top of it all our truck had been hi-jacked and the load of equipment stolen. It was as if Fate had it in for us.

Something else had changed too. I had met a girl who had attracted me in a way no woman had for years and it was useless to pretend otherwise. It was crazy, we had spent less than an hour together, but it had happened.

I started carrying the dirty things into the kitchen. There was some steak in the fridge I had intended grilling with some tomatoes for my supper, now I decided I needed company. I spent an hour cleaning the flat, then went out to a pub.

It was a mistake, there was nobody there I knew and when I got home the flat seemed emptier than ever. Against my own better judgement, I tried to ring Max to tell him I didn't want him or Stella going to see my mother again but Stella said he was out. She didn't say where and I didn't ask her. I left the message until Max was there and went to bed.

The next morning carried on where last night had left off. It was just as cold and today there was no sun, only a dull grey sky heavy with the threat of snow.

In spite of my efforts the flat still looked a mess. I breakfasted on toast and marmalade, then took some dirty sheets and clothes to the launderette. When I walked into the office it was ten minutes past nine.

Nancy had sorted the post.

'Hutchinsons have been on the 'phone,' she said. Hutchinsons was another of our suppliers, a company noted for its tough attitude over credit. My heart sank. 'They want you to ring them back.'

'Do you know what it's about?' I asked.

'They didn't say. It was a Mr Vernon called.'

The name didn't mean a thing to me but I could

guess what he wanted; Hutchinsons had heard the stories too.

'Are there any cheques in this morning?' I enquired. It took quite an effort to sound casual but I didn't intend even Nancy to know what was going on. Not yet, at least. Later it might be inevitable but then it would be too late for me to care.

'There's one from Carsons.'

'How much?'

'Two hundred and something.'

Better than nothing. Not enough to make much difference. I picked up my letters and took them into my office; Hutchinsons could wait a little while.

But the post contained nothing of interest. Nancy came in and I dictated some letters. When she had gone I asked Valerie to get me Vernon.

He turned out to be Hutchinsons' new sales manager. Robson, the man with whom we had dealt before, had left the company.

'This order we've had from you,' he said, 'I'm afraid we can't supply.' His tone was smooth, suave, not at all like Robson's bluff Yorkshire speech. A young man on the way up.

'Why not?' I asked. 'It's ordinary routine stuff.'

'You know how it is just now, a lot of lines are in short supply. I'm sorry.'

'So am I,' I told him. 'We need that stuff for a new job we're starting.'

'Yes, I'm sure.'

Sure, maybe, but not really sorry.

'Perhaps we'd better go somewhere else,' I suggested.

'That might be better.'

So now it was in the open. 'Who told you to say that?' I demanded angrily.

'I don't know what you mean, Mr Bruce.'

'Don't you? Let me speak to your chief accountant.'

'Very well.'

I waited, angry and humiliated, while the girl on their switchboard said, 'Trying to connect you,' several times. At last a man's voice said, 'Hopkins.'

'Are you the chief accountant?' I asked curtly.

'No, I'm his assistant. Can I help you?'

'No, I asked to speak to him.'

'I'll see if he's free,' Hopkins said reluctantly. I would have taken a bet that his boss had declined to take the call and passed the buck to him.

There was another lengthy pause, then an older voice said, 'Walker. I'm the chief accountant. Mr Bruce?'

'Yes.'

'Good morning, Mr Bruce, I understand you want to speak to me.'

'We've placed an order with your people,' I told him. 'Your sales manager tells me you can't meet it.'

'I'm sorry.'

That clinched it. If he hadn't been responsible he

would have said it was nothing to do with him.

'Are you worried about your account?'

'Well, it's a fortnight overdue and we have sent you the usual reminder.'

'We haven't had it.'

'Surely, Mr Bruce?'

'It would have come to me and I haven't seen it.'

'It was certainly sent.'

I could tell he didn't believe me. Either that or there hadn't been a reminder. They had heard the rumours and were getting in quickly, before our other creditors. That was why Vernon had telephoned instead of writing.

'There isn't any difficulty about paying,' I said as calmly as I could.

'I'm sure there isn't. It's just that there's a company rule now that when an account is more than seven days overdue we can't accept any further orders without cash. I'm sorry.'

'I'll see you get your cheque,' I told him and banged the 'phone down.

I wondered where we would get the supplies in time. We needed them badly or we wouldn't be able to start the job, rewiring a locomotive depot for British Rail. It was our first order from them and we couldn't afford to slip up on it.

I pulled out the cash flow figures I had been working on yesterday afternoon. Hadley had said the company couldn't afford to borrow any more money while interest rates were so high and I knew

he was right. But the only way of reducing our overheads was to cut our work force. We could probably manage with six or eight fewer men if we had to but I hated the idea of making anyone redundant just before Christmas. In any case, it would be several weeks before we felt any benefit and in the meantime it would only make matters worse, it would soon get around that Bruces had had to lay off men and that would be taken as confirmation of the rumours. The fact that even prosperous companies did it wouldn't make any difference.

I was still confident that if people paid us on time we should be all right, though Comfords wanting cash in future was a blow. But the bank had only given us two weeks and that might not be long enough. I kicked myself for not paying more attention to the list of debtors Joyce Redding produced for me every month. It was part of my job and I had neglected it.

I pushed the papers back in the drawer and went to talk to her.

CHAPTER SIX

The next week was blessedly free from new problems. Wally Thompson was able to obtain the materials we needed for the British Rail job, though we had to pay cash, and the stolen equipment was replaced much more quickly than we dared hope. The board paid us and I began to feel more cheerful.

On the Thursday morning I was sitting in my office listening to the rain drumming on the window. The snow had been followed by a few days' milder weather, during the night it had started raining and the morning forecast had been that there was little hope of it stopping before nightfall. There were puddles in the yard and the slate roofs glistened wetly.

The telephone rang and I picked it up.

'There's a Mr Peters for you,' Valerie said.

My thoughts had been far away and for a second the name didn't register with me. Then I realized: Roger.

'How are you, mate?' he enquired breezily.

'Fine,' I answered. 'You?'

'Great. We won 45–0 on Saturday and I got three tries. Me! The rest of them haven't stopped laugh-

ing yet. Thanks for taking Jenny home the other day.'

'It was a pleasure.'

I wondered if I had sounded too enthusiastic and imagined him sitting there grinning.

'Thanks, anyway.' He hesitated. Then, in a more serious tone, he went on, 'You didn't tell me you were selling.'

A cold, unpleasant sensation started in the pit of my stomach. It was getting so that if anything out of the ordinary happened I suspected the worst.

'What do you mean, selling?' I asked him.

'It is your advertisement, isn't it?'

'What advertisement?'

'Look, I'm sorry if—' He sounded awkward.

'I just don't know what you're talking about,' I told him.

'Have you seen this month's *Journal*?'

'Not yet.'

'It couldn't be anyone else's. At least, I didn't think it could.'

'What's it say?'

'I've got it here.' He read it out. I saw what he meant only too clearly. The way it was worded almost anyone in the trade who knew us would assume the firm was Bruces. 'For sale because of current trading conditions.'

The cold sensation was being replaced by hot anger.

'You mean it isn't you?' Roger asked.

'I've told you it isn't.'

'But who else can it be? I mean, who would put in an advert like that?'

The same person who had spread the rumours about our being in trouble and reported us to Forsyth's office. I had been right, it wasn't some disgruntled creditor, it was more serious than that. Much more serious.

'I don't know,' I admitted. 'There's somebody got it in for us. So far I've had two suppliers demanding cash, three visits from the factory inspectors in six weeks and a lorry hi-jacked.'

'*What*? It doesn't make sense.'

'It does to someone.'

'But it's a bloody awful thing to do.'

Honest, straightforward Roger. It was hard for him to accept, that sort of tactic belonged to the shady half-world of television serials, not small provincial companies. In our industry people knew each other. I was only just beginning to accept it myself.

'What are you going to do about it?'

'I don't know yet.'

'You've got to do something.'

'Don't you think I know that?'

'Yes, of course. Sorry. You'd better tell the *Journal* the advert's misleading; they'll have to print an apology or something.'

But it would be a month before it appeared. That was why the joker had chosen the *Journal* instead of

one of the trade weeklies. And I might not have a month. Perhaps it would be better to sell.

But I knew I wouldn't.

'You can tell me to go to hell if you want to,' Roger said diffidently, 'but—well, is there any truth in all this?'

'Not that we're thinking of selling, no. There wasn't in the rest of it before the stories started. You know what people are like, they start wanting their money before the crash comes. We've got cash flow problems but they aren't that serious.'

'I'd hate it if . . .' He didn't finish the sentence.

'Yes,' I said.

'I still can't see why anyone should want to do it.'

'Neither can I yet. That's what makes it so damned difficult to know what to do.'

'Neil.' He paused. 'Will you let me know if there's any way we can help? Before you do anything drastic?'

'All right,' I agreed. 'Thanks.'

I was grateful and I knew he meant it well but that didn't stop my pride being hurt. Worse, I wondered if he really believed me even now. He probably suspected we were in worse trouble than I had been prepared to admit. It was a reasonable supposition.

I said goodbye and replaced the 'phone.

Our copy of the *Journal* had arrived that morning. I hadn't got round to looking at it yet and it was still lying on the corner of my desk where Nancy had put it before I came in. I picked it up and turned

the pages until I found the advertisement. It would have been difficult to overlook it, it was larger and more conspicuous than any of the others on the page. Reading it, my anger rose again.

There were the agents' name and an address in North London. I had never heard of them but that didn't mean anything. Picking up the 'phone again I asked Valerie to get me one of the partners. Then I changed my mind and told her to cancel the call.

'Mrs Bruce is asking to speak to you,' she said.

For a moment I thought she meant my mother and I hoped she wasn't still worrying about what Stella had told her. At least she couldn't have seen the advertisement.

'Put her through,' I said.

'Neil.' It wasn't my mother, it was Stella and my heart sank.

'Hallo, Stella.'

'Are you doing anything this evening, darling?' Her tone was unusually friendly.

I didn't trust my sister-in-law much at any time and especially not when she was being sweet.

'I don't know,' I answered guardedly.

'Oh good, that means you aren't. Come to dinner. It's absolutely ages since you've been and Max and I would love to see you.'

Even for Stella's social chat that was going a bit far.

'I'm afraid I can't,' I began.

'But if you aren't doing anything . . .'

I wished devoutly I had lied and said I would be out. Not that it would have been any good, she would simply have suggested other evenings until I couldn't find excuses any longer. She wasn't asking me to go because she and Max wanted to see me, they had some other motive and they would ensure I went.

'All right,' I agreed ungraciously.

She ignored my lack of enthusiasm. 'Oh lovely! About eight then? We'll look forward to it. 'Bye, dear.'

Blast! I thought. Oh well, I didn't expect to enjoy myself but apart from wasting an evening I would probably have spent alone and out of sorts with the world anyway, it wouldn't do any actual harm and I could leave early. Moreover, the meal would certainly be a great deal better than my normal fare, Stella was an excellent cook and she would pull out all the stops to impress me. She didn't give a damn for my good opinion, it would all be part of the game, designed to show me how successful Max was compared with his failure of a brother.

I told Valerie that if anybody 'phoned I was going up to town, put on my coat and went to have a word with Nancy.

'There's a company advertised for sale in the *Journal*,' I told her. 'I don't know who they are but the way the advert's worded, people may think it's us. If anybody rings about it, tell them it's not, will you?'

'Yes, of course,' she said.

She might be surprised but she didn't ask any questions. That was one of Nancy's great virtues, she knew when to keep her own counsel. I daresay my expression warned her that this was one of those times.

'I'm going to see the agents, I expect I'll be back about three.'

She nodded and I went down to get my car out of the garage.

The traffic on the motorway threw up clouds of dirty spray and the Rover's wipers clacked monotonously. The radio offered a choice of Jimmy Young or an advice programme for young mothers; I wasn't in the mood for either and I couldn't bother to find another station.

It took me some time to locate the agents' office sandwiched between a tobacconist's and a launderette in a decaying side street. 'ESTATE AGENTS' and 'BUSINESS TRANSFER AGENTS' were spelt out in fading letters across the two windows while curling cardboard signs proclaimed that the firm also represented one of the more obscure building societies and an insurance company. Judging by the appearance of their premises, they didn't do much business in any of their capacities.

The inside was as shabby as the exterior. When I walked in a dumpy girl of about seventeen looked up and said 'Yes?' without any apparent interest.

'I'd like to see one of the partners,' I told her.

The blank expression didn't change. 'There's Mr Smith,' she said doubtfully.

'Is he one of the partners?'

'He owns the firm.'

'I'd like to see him then,' I said, trying not to sound impatient.

The girl turned and disappeared through a door behind her, her boots clumping on the bare floor and her backside wobbling heavily. I waited a couple of minutes, then another door opened and a middle-aged man with a florid complexion, a weight problem and almost no neck emerged.

'Good afternoon.' He almost gushed, at least he was pleased to see me. 'Can I help you, sir?'

'I've come about the advertisement in the *Electrical Trades Journal*.'

'Ah yes. Yes. Come in, won't you?'

Whoever it was who had placed the advertisement, he had chosen the agent well, Smith had probably welcomed him with open arms and not asked too many questions. I followed him into a small room furnished almost as sparsely and shabbily as the outer office. The window looked as if it hadn't been open in years and a small fan heater was blasting out far more hot air than was comfortable. I unbuttoned my raincoat.

'Won't you sit down, Mr—?'

'James,' I said. I wasn't ready yet to let him know who I was and it was the first name that came into

my head. 'Where is this business you're advertising?'

'Albridge. It's a very good little company. Well, not so small really.' He gave an empty, professional laugh. 'A first class opportunity for someone who wants to buy a going concern.'

'What's its name?' I asked.

'W. T. Bruce (Electrical Contractors) Ltd. They're very well known in the trade. Very good reputation.'

My anger had cooled to a cold fury. It was an effort to ask him, 'Why are they selling?'

'Well, you know how it is.' He smirked. 'The directors aren't as young as they were and what with inflation and VAT and the rest of it . . . People like to enjoy the years they have left to them without worrying about all that. I don't mind saying, they've allowed the business to go downhill the last year or two, that's why they're prepared to consider a reasonable offer.'

I resisted an impulse to hit him. Presumably he was only repeating what he had been told.

'Who told you it was for sale?' I demanded.

Smith looked taken aback. 'The directors naturally—'

'Which one?'

'I don't think I can—'

'I do.'

'Mr James—'

'My name isn't James,' I told him bluntly, 'it's

Bruce. I'm the chairman and managing director of the company you're offering for sale and I own sixty per cent of the shares. The other directors are my mother and a man named Thompson. Last year we made the highest profit we've ever made. You've been taken for a ride, Mr Smith. You've advertised a company for sale without authority and you've implied in print that it's in financial difficulties. On top of that, you've just made statements that are untrue and which I consider libellous. I shall see the company's solicitors and no doubt they will start an action for damages. Now what do you say?'

He didn't say much. He spluttered a bit, then began to look frightened. I was almost sorry for him, he was a pathetic figure and no doubt he had acted in good faith.

'How do I know your name's Bruce?' he argued. 'You said it was James.'

'How much would you have told me if you'd known who I was?' I pulled out my wallet and showed him my driving licence. 'Does that satisfy you?'

'Yes. Yes, of course.' He was sweating profusely; maybe it was the heat in the room. 'I hope you'll accept that I acted in all good faith. I had no idea.'

'You mean you weren't surprised an old established company in Albridge which was so well known in the trade should come to you?' I looked round the squalid little office.

'Well, I have to admit I was rather.'

'I'm sure you were. So you didn't ask any questions.'

'I can only say how sorry I am.' Smith was almost writhing.

'Not only, you can tell me who came to see you.'

'He didn't, he rang me up. I told him I would want written instructions and he sent me a letter.'

'I'd like to see it.'

'Yes, of course.'

He heaved himself out of his chair and went across to the door. 'Bring me Bruces' file, Dawn,' he called to the girl.

'Did he tell you to advertise in the *Journal*?' I asked.

'Yes. He said that would be the best way to find a genuine buyer.'

A filing cabinet drawer slid shut with a metallic clang and the girl clumped in with a file. Smith extracted a letter from it and handed it to me. The girl clumped out again. The letter was on the company's printed paper and signed 'N. Bruce.' It was even something like my signature. The letter was brief, no more than Smith had already told me. The last sentence read, 'As this matter is highly confidential, the writer will be obliged if no acknowledgement is sent.'

'I'll take this,' I said.

Smith opened his mouth, then closed it again. If he had been going to object he had thought better of it. I put the letter in my wallet.

'You didn't notice the postmark on the envelope, I suppose?' I enquired.

'No. Dawn opens all our letters.'

There couldn't be many. I stood up.

'All right. I'll leave it to you to cancel everything to do with the sale.'

'Oh yes, indeed.'

'I expect you will be hearing from our solicitors.'

Smith looked hunted. I would see what the solicitors had to say but I doubted if there was any point in taking any action, welcome though damages would be.

He came to see me out. 'If there's anything I can do . . .' he said.

There wasn't, it was too late. I got into the Rover and drove back to Albridge. The rain was heavier than ever.

I found a place to park near the cathedral and walked up the hill past the old houses that now were mostly occupied by smart little dress shops and antique dealers. A couple of days ago I had seen a picture in one of the windows, a small seascape with sailing craft and the sun breaking through storm clouds. It was dated 1844. However hackneyed the subject, it had taken my fancy but when I saw that the price was £200 I put it out of my mind. I was in no position to spend so much on a picture, however much I liked it.

But now I was in a reckless mood and I decided it would make the flat a little less bleak. At least when

I was feeling depressed I could look at it. It was still in the window and I went in and bought it, the woman who owned the shop accepting my cheque without question. She knew me but I wondered wrily how much longer people would do that.

When I got back to the flat I hung the picture over the fireplace. The lighting was all wrong but even so it did something for the room. Satisfied, I got myself a snack, ate it and went down to the office.

'Has anybody rung about the advert?' I asked Nancy.

'No. Who put it in?'

'Goodness knows. The agents are sorting it out.'

She gave me an odd look but I left it at that, walked through to my office and sat down at the desk.

Why? Roger had been right, by itself the advertisement didn't make any sense unless it was some crank's idea of a practical joke. But taken in conjunction with everything else that had happened it assumed a more sinister aspect. There had been far too many unexplained incidents for them to be written off as coincidence. But if they were all part of some plot, who was behind it? And again—why?

In the end I gave up trying to puzzle it out and got on with the work I had left that morning.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Max and Stella lived in a largish, faintly Tudor-style house at Hartbourn, six miles from Albridge. A village fifty years ago, Hartbourn had grown with the inexorable tide of commuters moving out of London and now, away from the old centre with its shops and pubs, there was a succession of quiet residential roads lined with houses like theirs but no two exactly similar. It was said the owners were so obsessed with external appearances that inside some of the houses were hardly furnished. Hartbourn was that sort of place.

I was mildly surprised to find two other cars standing on the drive in front of the big double garage, a Rolls and a Jaguar. Stella drove a Lotus. She had said nothing to suggest there would be other guests but I didn't mind, they would save me from listening to Max all the evening.

Stella answered the door. She was several years younger than Max, a well-built blonde in danger of becoming statuesque. If you ignored the hardness of her eyes and the petulant lines round her mouth she was an attractive woman and she invariably dressed well. Tonight she was wearing a long, slim

white dress that showed off the splendid lines of her bust.

'Neil!' she exclaimed. 'How lovely to see you, darling.'

Her voice was pitched to carry.

'Hallo, Stella,' I said. At least, as no one was watching she didn't expect me to kiss her.

She led the way into the lounge. It was a pleasant room and however much I disliked Stella I had to admit she had furnished it well. There was a cheerful fire in the hearth and five other people were sitting round holding glasses and chatting.

'Ah, there you are!' Max said, standing up. I wondered if the other guests would detect the shallowness of his welcome, it was patently obvious to me.

He introduced them. A heavily built, middle-aged man with glasses and a dark woman in green were Harry and Vera Ward. He was a director of one of the big construction companies and a leading figure in the Federation. We had met before but it was a long time ago and he showed no sign of remembering me. The other couple were younger, a sharp featured man with thinning sandy hair Max introduced as Andrew Kingsley and his wife. Ann Kingsley was a quietly pretty girl with a sweet, rather shy smile and I wondered how she came to be married to an obvious shark like her husband.

'G-and-t, Neil?' Max enquired, pouring it without waiting for me to answer.

His back was towards me and I couldn't see what he put into the glass. I didn't like gin and when I sipped it the tang warned me that if I had another like this and wine with dinner I wouldn't be in any state to drive home.

After a few routine pleasantries Ward and Kingsley resumed the conversation with Max they had been having before I arrived. Vera Ward was talking to Stella and Ann Kingsley and I were left to ourselves. She didn't seem to mind and we chatted happily enough until Stella excused herself to see to dinner. Then Max came round with a bottle of whisky in one hand and gin in the other. Ward and Kingsley were both drinking Scotch; Vera Ward accepted a little more gin but Ann Kingsley held her hand over the top of her glass.

'I expect I'll have to drive home,' she explained, laughing.

Her husband didn't look very pleased.

Max turned to me and before I could stop him he had nearly filled my glass with neat gin.

'It won't hurt you,' he said, laughing good humouredly when I protested.

He went back to the other two men and Vera joined in their conversation. Ann Kingsley looked at me and grimaced.

Five minutes later Stella returned and announced that dinner was ready. I let the others go ahead of me and as they headed for the door tipped my gin over the back of the settee. I was sorry about

the carpet but Max had asked for it and there was nowhere else I could see. At least Stella didn't go in for potted plants.

In the dining-room with its inevitable reproduction furniture silver and glass sparkled in the candlelight. It was a charming, civilized setting and in other company and circumstances I would have enjoyed myself; as it was I was still trying to fathom why Max and Stella had been so insistent I should come.

I had half hoped Stella would seat me next to Ann Kingsley but instead I found myself between Max at one end of the table and her husband. Max embarked on a mild flirtation with Mrs Ward and almost ignored me. I didn't mind, I preferred my own thoughts to his brand of dinner-table conversation. Kingsley clearly regarded me as unworthy of his attention and after one or two conventional remarks he turned to Ward.

If he hoped to hold the older man's interest he failed, Ward just as clearly preferred talking to Stella. I didn't blame him, at least she was good to look at and she was responsive.

Then, in a slight lull in the talk, I heard him mention my name. Apparently he had asked her what sort of business I had. She was looking straight at me, her eyes mocking.

'It's a little electrical company,' she answered, making it sound as if Bruces was a back street shop selling bits and pieces. 'Max's father started it and

when he died, because of Neil's handicap, he left most of the shares to him.'

'Handicap?' Ann Kingsley echoed, looking at me.

'Didn't you know? He was crippled in a car crash. That's why he limps.'

'Hardly crippled,' I muttered. I felt myself reddening and tried not to let my anger show.

'Oh, I'm sorry.' Ann looked embarrassed. 'I hadn't noticed.'

'He hides it very well,' Stella agreed generously. 'It was terribly sad, his wife was killed. They were coming home from a party.'

'Actually,' I said clearly, 'we had been to spend the weekend with Barbara's parents.'

'Oh, I thought it was some kind of celebration, a silver wedding or something.' Stella smiled and turned back to Ward. 'Max says Neil is a wonderful engineer but business is so complicated these days, isn't it? It's hard to cope if you haven't been trained for it. He's trying to sell the company and I'm sure it's the right thing to do.'

'Who told you that?' I demanded.

She looked along the table at Max, eyebrows raised in surprise. 'Max did. He said you'd advertised it in some paper.'

'Well, he was wrong; I haven't the least intention of selling.' I turned to Max. 'Who told you about that advertisement?'

He smiled disarmingly, as if to say none of this

really mattered anyway. 'A chap called Hayward. One of my companies is setting up a deal for him. He said it must be Bruces and he took it for granted I knew. He'd heard you were having problems.'

'What problems?'

'Look—' Max began.

'We aren't having problems.' I knew I had spoken too emphatically.

'Good,' Max said easily. 'I admit I was a bit hurt you hadn't said anything to me first if you wanted to sell. I know things haven't been easy for you lately but you've only got to let me know if you need help.'

'Thanks,' I said curtly, cursing his offensiveness, 'I don't.'

'After all,' Stella pointed out, 'Max does have an interest in the company.'

'I'm hardly likely to forget it.'

'No, well . . .' Max said.

Kingsley looked bored and mildly contemptuous, his wife and Mrs Ward embarrassed. Harry Ward was eyeing me thoughtfully. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking but I suspected that tomorrow he would start making enquiries. When he learnt what sort of work Bruces did he would put his weight discreetly behind the stories that were circulating. A hint here, a friendly warning there. That was all we needed.

His wife, from boredom or to relieve an awkward situation, turned back to Max and began telling him

about the holiday she and her husband had just had in South Africa. I caught Ann Kingsley's eye and grinned. She smiled back uncertainly.

The meal dragged on. Virtually ignored by the others, I had time to think. It hadn't been done very subtly but the effect would be none the less for that, between them Max and Stella had ensured that the rumours about Bruces would spread and be taken for true. By my over-hasty denial of any problems I had as good as confirmed they existed.

We were drinking a good claret and normally I would have appreciated it. Now something warned me to be on my guard. I didn't know what I expected to happen but I had a feeling something would. I barely sipped the wine and when Max replenished my glass it was still half full. He nearly filled it, although I noticed he treated the others with a lighter hand.

I knew before that he had heard the stories. That didn't surprise me, he had a nose for trouble and moreover I had suspected at the time he had seen the letter from the bank that morning he came to the office. It was like him and Stella to make sure the rumours flourished.

But was there more to it than that? The letter Smith had received had been typed on Bruces' paper, Max could have helped himself to a few sheets that morning. And I didn't believe his tale about a business acquaintance telling him he had seen the advertisement, it had come out too glibly.

As if he had the explanation ready. It wasn't likely he read the *Journal* himself, either. So how had he known?

Unless he had instructed Smith.

But that meant he had started the rumours too. It didn't make sense, why should he? After all, as Stella had gone out of her way to remind me, he owned fifteen per cent of the shares, if Bruces failed he would lose a considerable sum.

But his loss would be nothing compared with mine. And he could afford it.

I knew Max disliked me and had always resented our father's leaving me most of the shares but it had never occurred to me he would go to these lengths. If I was right, he had set out coldly and deliberately to ruin the firm. There must be something else, surely?

Then I thought I saw the answer, he wanted control himself. Not because Bruces meant anything to him in itself but to deprive me of what he considered was rightfully his. And to score over me. That would count as much with him. The directors could block the transfer of shares but if the company was on the verge of bankruptcy I would be in no position to stop him acquiring mine. And until then he could stop my selling to anyone else, he had only to tell my mother some tale. Not that I was likely to find anyone prepared to pay much for them now.

Once he gained control he would put in some-

body to run the business and if it had to go into liquidation it wouldn't worry him much. He would claim I had left it in such a state it was past saving.

The more I thought about it the more convinced I became that I was right. It was the sort of plot that would appeal to him. And Max had persuaded me to buy the freehold of the works, laughing aside my protests that the company couldn't afford it. He had known about the job near Birmingham, too; had he set up the hi-jacking?

'Neil!' Stella said, her tone touched with impatience.

I realized she had spoken to me before and Kingsley was holding out a plate. I muttered an apology and took it but I didn't want to eat anything else. I toyed with the food, half-listening to the conversation round me. Max was saying something to Vera Ward about Sardinia and her husband was talking to Kingsley.

We moved back into the lounge for coffee.

'God, it's like a distillery in here!' Stella exclaimed, wrinkling her nose.

It was true, the room stank of gin and I wondered how long it would be before someone detected the dried pool behind the settee.

Max started asking us if we would prefer brandy or something else. When he came to me I told him I didn't want anything but coffee.

'You can't be serious.' He grinned. 'Come on, what's it going to be?'

'Nothing. I mean it.' His mock jocularity was getting under my skin.

There wasn't much he could do so he shrugged and went to get the others' drinks. But I hadn't missed the little spark of anger that had shown in his eyes or the way the lines round his mouth had tightened. Maybe he had thought that if he could get me to drink a brandy on top of so much gin and the wine my tongue might be loosened and I might damn myself in front of Ward. If so, he was going to be disappointed.

'Do you always drink so little?' Vera Ward enquired. I guessed she was remembering Stella's innuendo at dinner and wondering if I had stopped after the accident.

'Not always,' I answered lightly. 'Only when I'm driving; I always have then.'

'I rather suspected so,' she said, smiling suddenly.

I stared at her in surprise but she had turned and was saying something to Ann Kingsley. I drank my coffee and announced that I must go.

'So soon?' Stella exclaimed. 'It's only half-past ten.'

Max glanced at his watch. 'You can't go yet,' he protested. 'If you won't have a liqueur, what about something else? More coffee? Stella?'

Why was he so anxious I should stay? Unless it was simply a pretence for the benefit of the others.

'No, I must go,' I told him. 'We're very busy and

there's some work I must do tonight.'

The lie didn't trouble my conscience. Probably it didn't convince anyone else either. But I wanted to get away, even the chill loneliness of the flat would be better than the atmosphere in this room. And I wasn't thinking of the gin fumes. I stood up.

Max made another half-hearted protest but he couldn't very well keep me there and I was pretty sure both he and Stella would be glad to see the back of me. Even without any brandy they had achieved their object; I doubted if Bruces would get much more work from the big contracting firms in future.

I said goodnight and Max came out to the hall with me to get my coat. As soon as we were alone he dropped any pretence of friendliness. He didn't help me on with my coat and I opened the door for myself. Perversely, that made me feel better, as if I had scored a point for once. It was so childish.

The rain had stopped and now it was a fine clear night. I drove down the hill, turned on to the main road and pressed my foot a little harder on the accelerator. The Rover responded and the speedometer needle swung up to the fifty mark.

I had driven about two miles when I heard the police car.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I heard the siren first. Then the car came round the bend behind me fast and I saw the blue light flashing in my rear view mirror. I slowed a little and kept right in to the side of the road, if he was in a hurry to get somewhere I wasn't going to delay him. Police cars were common enough along this stretch, only two lanes wide, winding and undulating, it had more than its share of accidents. Especially at night.

Then I saw that the man beside the driver was waving me to stop. Surprised, I obeyed. The car passed me, pulled over and rolled to a halt a few yards in front of the Rover. Two uniformed figures climbed out. There is something solid and inexorable about policemen getting out of a car. I wound down my window, wondering if a light bulb had gone or they had spotted that one of my tyres was soft.

'Do you know what speed you were doing, sir?' The taller of them leaned on the door and looked in at me. His companion was walking round the Rover, studying it. I knew a lot of the policemen at Albridge but these were both strangers.

'Yes, just under fifty,' I replied. Not a faulty bulb then.

'Is this car yours?'

'Yes.'

'Can you tell me the number, sir?'

I did, and produced my driving licence and insurance certificate. Somebody had once told me you should never hand over your licence, if you did they could see any endorsements. That didn't worry me, there weren't any. The policeman studied the licence, then the certificate and handed them back.

'Do you mind telling me where you've come from, sir?'

'Hartbourn. I've been to a dinner party.'

'Have you had much to drink?'

'One gin and tonic and a glass and a half of wine.'

'That's all, sir?'

'Yes.' A suspicion was forming in my mind and I didn't like it.

The shorter policeman had joined his colleague now. They gave me their little bag to blow into and I did so confidently, glad I hadn't drunk that second, nearly neat gin or the brandy Max had tried to press on me.

They eyed the breathalyser phlegmatically. I wondered if they were disappointed; how did policemen feel on these occasions? Perhaps they had had a boring shift.

'Why did you stop me?' I asked. 'I was driving perfectly normally and I wasn't doing more than fifty.'

They looked at each other, then back at me. It would have been clear to a blind man they were thinking I was going to be difficult. I wasn't, I just wanted to know. Because I thought I knew already and I wanted them to confirm it.

But I knew they wouldn't. If they had been men who knew me they might have dropped a hint but they weren't.

'Did someone report I wasn't fit to drive?'

'We can't tell you anything about that, sir,' the shorter one said. 'I'm sorry you've been troubled.'

He turned and started walking back to their car.

'Are you suggesting some friend of yours played a joke on you?' his companion asked.

'He's no friend.'

The shorter one stopped and looked back. I had their attention now.

'He tried to get me stoned all evening,' I said. 'I suppose when I left he rang your people to say I wasn't in a state to drive but he couldn't stop me. Either he was aiding and abetting me or he was making a false report and wasting your time.'

They hesitated and I guessed they were considering whether, if what I said was true, it was worth doing anything about it. Their expressions told me nothing.

'I see, sir,' the taller one said. 'Goodnight.'

Perhaps they had decided I was trying to get my own back. I watched them get into their car and drive off fast towards Albridge, started the Rover

and followed them more slowly. Max was leaving no stone unturned but he shouldn't have tried the same trick twice, first with Forsyth, now the police.

It was some time before I got to sleep. I was thinking about Stella in her white gown, her make-up flawless but with malice in her eyes she couldn't conceal. And about Max. I was sure now he had started the rumours and told Smith to find a buyer for Bruces. He had almost certainly reported us to the Health and Safety people and set up the hi-jacking as well. Now he had tried to fix it so that I lost my licence.

I remembered what Wally Thompson had said about everything going wrong lately. A thought struck me, so appalling it was like a physical blow. All this had started with the accident at Finlays; but had it been an accident? The tower hadn't been properly secured, that could have been deliberate. If it was, Bob Gurney had been murdered.

The other night when I was attacked I had been looking at the wreckage of the tower. Until now I had taken it for granted the intruder was a petty thief after tools or fittings but the door hadn't been forced and the men had plenty of opportunities to help themselves during the day without returning at night. He could have been examining the wreckage himself, making sure there was nothing there that might betray him. And when he saw me looking at it he had panicked.

I remembered something else. Max had known I

would be out that evening, he had rung to ask me to dinner and I had told him. Nobody else connected with the firm knew. Which meant that Max had bribed one of the men to cause the tower to collapse.

The footprints in the snow had been a small man's. That night at Finlays a small man had come out of the lavatory looking badly shocked. Worse than any of the others. Lawrence. Yet Everett had said he wasn't anywhere near the tower when it collapsed and I wouldn't have put him down as a sensitive man. Far from it, he was a grasping, whining type. And he hadn't been with the company long enough to be on close terms with Bob Gurney. Not that I could imagine Gurney wanting much to do with him, anyway.

Lawrence, I suspected, would be prepared to do almost anything for money. But he hadn't reckoned on a man being killed.

I thought of Mrs Gurney when I saw her at the funeral, she seemed to have shrunk and her eyes were dead. How different from Stella. I felt bitter resentment. It hadn't anything to do with money or social position, they only made it seem worse; Stella was protected in a way Bob Gurney's widow could never be. Perhaps it was a matter of personality. Blessed are the meek. Well, nobody could call my sister-in-law meek.

* * *

When I woke the sun was shining through the faded curtains. I climbed out of bed and padded along to the bathroom. Considering that I hadn't a hangover, I felt remarkably as if I had.

'There's a cheque from Eastleighs,' Nancy greeted me when I walked into the office.

'All they owe us?'

'Just over four thousand pounds.'

Most of it then. It would help but it still wasn't enough and there were only four days of Hadley's fortnight left.

I took my post into my room and when Joyce Redding arrived told her to send a cheque to Hutchinsons. Today was Friday, it would be at least Tuesday before it came through even if they had it specially cleared.

The rest of the post was routine stuff. Except for one letter cancelling an order. It was worth over £10,000 and although we hadn't signed contracts I had depended on it. We had done work for the customers for over fifteen years and I knew they had always been satisfied. I read their letter again feeling angry and resentful. 'Due to the present economic climate we have regretfully decided we would not be justified in carrying out the proposed expansion at this time.' It might even be true but I was in no mood to believe it.

Wally Thompson stuck his head round the door. 'Have you got a minute, Neil?' he asked.

I sighed inwardly and wished he would make

decisions himself. He was at least as competent as I was in most things relating to the business but still he preferred to talk them over with me and let me make up his mind for him. Perhaps I would resent it if he stopped.

'What is it?' I asked him, trying to sound more cheerful than I felt.

He came in, closed the door behind him and sat down facing me across the desk. His lean face was solemn and he looked unusually determined, as if he had had to steel himself to an unpleasant task.

'The men are worried,' he said bluntly.

Oh Lord! I thought. Not that. Not now. The next moment I told myself not to be so damned arrogant. Some of them had worked for Bruces a lot longer than I had and if the company went to the wall they would lose a lot more.

'What about?' I asked.

He eyed me straight. That was one thing about Wally, when he did make up his mind he didn't pussyfoot about, he came to the point.

'There are a lot of stories going round that we're in trouble. Going bust. Is it right?'

'It's not as bad as that.'

'But not far off?' He frowned. 'You run the money side, I don't pretend I understand half of it, but you haven't said anything about our being in a mess.'

'I'm sorry, Wally.' He was a director and I should have kept him in the picture. I told myself I had

been going to, I had just been waiting until I was more sure myself what was happening. Until I could see a way out. But it was only partly true, there had been plenty of opportunities and we had talked about his side of things, never mine. I looked on Bruces as my company and it wasn't.

'You'd better tell me,' he said. It was the nearest to an ultimatum he had ever come and I knew how worried he must be.

'We're getting less credit from our suppliers and our customers are taking more,' I told him. 'Inflation's made it worse.'

'I know all about that.' He brushed it aside almost contemptuously, as if I were insulting his intelligence.

'All right, it's fairly serious,' I said, nettled. 'The account's been over the limit at the bank and things are going to be tricky for the next few weeks but basically we're all right. Or we would be if someone hadn't started spreading these stories. Now Comfords and Hutchinsons want cash.'

'They're only stories then?'

'So far.' He had asked for the truth.

'The men have heard them.'

I wasn't surprised, Max would hardly have missed that trick and he had somebody in the firm working for him. It was probably the most damaging thing he had done.

'Whoever it is'—I still couldn't bring myself to tell Wally what I suspected—'put an advertisement

in the *Journal* saying the company was for sale.'

He nodded. 'I know.'

That did surprise me, I didn't think he read the *Journal*. 'How?'

'Harry Lawrence showed it to Ted. He told me.'

'How did Lawrence see it?'

'Lord knows.'

So did I. Lawrence would never have bought the *Journal* himself, Max must have given it to him and told him to show it to the other men.

'I've seen the agents and told the editor,' I said. 'They're stopping the advert. and the *Journal* will print an apology next month.'

'The damage'll be done by then. What the hell's it all about?' Wally was nobody's fool, perhaps he guessed I was keeping something back.

'I don't know. It looks as if somebody's trying to push us into a corner so that we have to sell or go bust and he can buy us out cheap.'

'Is that legal?'

I didn't know. It didn't seem to make much difference if it was or not.

'How near are we to that?' he asked.

'Heenans have cancelled their order and with suppliers wanting cash we need to get some money in quickly. I've been chasing the slowest ones.'

Wally was eyeing me steadily. 'You think we'll get through all right?'

'I reckon we've a sporting chance.'

'That sounds too much like a gamble for me. I've

never been a betting man.'

'What do you want me to say?'

He grinned suddenly. He didn't smile often and when he did it was usually a slow, appreciative grin. 'That there's nothing wrong and everything's going to be fine. But I'm glad you didn't, I wouldn't have believed you.' He paused. 'We could lay off some of the men.'

'Just before Christmas? Anyway, it would look bad, people would think the stories were true.' I wondered whether to tell him what I suspected about the accident at Finlays and my being attacked in the stores but I couldn't see that it would help, just worry him more. And the fewer people who knew just now the better.

He stood up. 'Thanks for telling me.'

I knew he didn't mean it that way but I felt that I had let him down. He went out, pulling the door to behind him. Then he opened it again and looked in.

'There's a lady to see you, Neil.'

CHAPTER NINE

She was dark and as attractive as I remembered, enveloped in a swirling striped cape with a hood. Jennifer Peters. I felt a little shock of pleasure.

'Hallo, Neil.' She smiled, the frank, challenging smile I had recalled more often than was sensible this last week.

'Come in,' I said, not caring if she saw how glad I was she had come.

'May I?'

She came and I closed the door behind her, ashamed of my dingy little office.

'It isn't much of a place,' I apologized. 'One of these days I'll get round to doing something about it.'

'Like your exhaust pipe.' She laughed.

'That's done.'

She sat down, revealing long, polished brown leather boots. 'Is it all right my dropping in like this? I'm not interrupting you or anything?'

'No, I wasn't doing anything much.' Except talking to Wally about the odds on the company going broke. Even that didn't seem to matter quite so much now she was here.

'I had to come to Albridge—to bring some pic-

tures to a gallery. It's the first time I've been for ages.'

'Have you looked round?'

'Not yet.'

'Would you like to? Now?'

'Are you trying to get rid of me?'

'I meant I'd come with you.'

'Oh, that's different. I'd love to, in that case. But can you?'

'Yes, of course.' I could do my work this evening. 'And lunch?'

Jennifer hesitated.

'I'm sorry,' I said, 'you'll want to get back.'

'No, I'm free for the rest of the day. Lunch would be great.'

'I'll get my coat,' I told her, wondering why I should feel so exhilarated just because a girl I hardly knew had agreed to let me show her round the city like some tourist. 'It's in the flat.'

'You live here, don't you?'

'Yes.'

'Roger told me. He said he came back with you after a dinner or something once and you both drank so much he had to stay the night.' She laughed.

I remembered. It had been soon after my father died and I was just beginning to find my feet in the job. After spending most evenings at home working it had been a sort of release. Strange Roger should remember too, it couldn't have meant much

to him, even at the time. Just another heavy night with a hangover the next day.

I shovelled papers into my briefcase and left it on my desk. I could pick it up later. Then I told Valerie I would be out if anyone rang.

'I shouldn't drag you away,' Jennifer said apologetically.

'You're not. You're doing me a good turn, I've earned a few hours off.'

She smiled. 'Does that make me the cause or the excuse?'

'Both.'

We went out to the main office and I stopped at Nancy's desk to tell her I might not be back. She nodded, eyeing Jennifer.

On the landing I said, 'The flat's up there. I shan't be a minute.'

'May I come up?'

'If you want to. It's nothing much to see.'

At least, I thought, I had cleared the breakfast things away this morning but still the living-room looked a mess even to me.

It faced north-east and what sun there was had already passed it by. Jennifer stood just inside the door taking it in, then walked over to the window.

'You've a good view,' she remarked.

It wasn't bad. Indeed, it was the best thing about the flat. Most of the buildings in this part of the city were only two storeys high and I could look across the uneven jumble of roofs and the narrow chasms

of the streets to the cathedral. The scene probably hadn't changed much in a couple of hundred years.

'The abbey's huge, isn't it?' Jennifer said.

'Yes.'

It was one of the largest in England and built on the crest of a hill so that its bulk dominated the city. It had always seemed to me that this was how it must have been in the Middle Ages, the houses of the little town huddling around it for shelter. There was a rightness about it. I said something of the sort to Jennifer.

'Yes,' she agreed, eyeing me in such a frankly curious way I felt I had made a fool of myself.

After a second or two she turned and saw the picture I had bought the previous day. 'I like that,' she said.

'Do you?' I was pleased, I had expected it to be too conventional for her taste. 'I only bought it yesterday. I had decided I couldn't afford it, then I thought, what the hell?'

'Do you often do that?'

'What? Buy pictures?'

'No, act on impulse.'

'Sometimes. Not very often.'

'So do I. The funny thing is, I'm hardly ever sorry afterwards.'

Her eyes met mine and I wondered if she had acted on impulse coming today. But she had said she came to bring some pictures.

* * *

We walked down to the lake. Down the street with the antique shops she wanted to stop and look in all the windows.

'Do you know anything about antiques?' I asked her.

She shook her head. 'No, I wish I did. Do you?'

'No,' I confessed.

We walked on. I had forgotten and walked too fast and she caught my arm to slow me.

'You don't have to prove anything, you know,' she told me, laughing. Then the laughter faded from her eyes, 'You don't, Neil.'

'Don't I?'

She left her arm linked with mine.

It had turned much colder during the night and the ducks were paddling on a skin of ice. We watched them for a few minutes until Jennifer shivered suddenly, then we walked back the other way, up the lane that led past the west end of the abbey.

'It's strange, it doesn't look so big from here,' she remarked. 'Yet we're nearer.'

'It's the angle,' I said. 'You can't see all of it at once.'

'No.' She gazed up at the towering edifice. 'There's something reassuring about it, isn't there?'

'It's so big and it's been there so long.'

'Perhaps. And all that dedication. Faith.'

'You believe that has something to do with it?'

Her eyes were solemn. 'I'd like to. I think

perhaps it has. After all, plenty of people believe evil leaves an atmosphere in some places, why not good?'

I wondered if she was right.

We had lunch in the bar of a small, ancient pub near the top of the street. It was crowded with regular customers and noisy with their talk. We sat in an alcove just large enough for the two of us while the crowd ebbed and flowed past us.

'Roger says somebody is trying to make trouble for Bruces,' Jennifer said suddenly, spreading butter thickly on a split of French bread and not looking at me. 'He's mad about it. Why should they?'

I didn't often talk about the company's affairs out of the office but somehow it seemed quite natural to tell her. I had almost forgotten we had first met only a few days ago. I told her about the rumours, the hi-jacking and the advertisement but I didn't say anything about Gurney's death or the incident in the stores. Nor about last night. Maybe I would some time but not yet.

'It's diabolical!' she exclaimed when I had finished.

'Yes,' I agreed.

'Isn't there anything you can do to stop it?'

'I'll try. But it's going to take time.' Her concern made me feel better.

'Is there anything we can do?'

'I don't think so.'

We stayed there talking until they closed the pub, then we walked back to the works. A cold wind was blowing down the street.

There was a Ford Granada parked in the yard by the foot of the stairs to the office and I wondered who it belonged to. Jennifer paused, resting one hand on the top of her GT6.

'It's been lovely, Neil. Thank you for taking the time off.'

She sounded as if she meant it and on the spur of the moment I asked her, 'Will you have dinner with me tomorrow?'

She nodded calmly. 'I'd love to.'

I had hardly dared hope she would agree. 'Where?'

'There's a little place not far from home, the King's Head at Steeple Clinton, is that all right?'

'Fine,' I assured her. 'I'll come for you at seven-thirty.'

She smiled. 'You're acting on impulse again.'

'So are you,' I pointed out.

She laughed, gathered her cape round her and climbed into her car, winding down the window.

''Bye, Neil. Take care of yourself.' She sounded concerned, almost worried.

As if she understood I might need to.

'And you,' I told her.

She turned the car in a wide, confident arc and drove out of the yard, waving her arm out of the window before she turned into the street. Elated, I

walked across to the door at the foot of the office stairs.

I was about to open it when two men emerged from the stores. They were both middle-aged, both wearing hats. Only one had an overcoat and the other a sheepskin jacket. Strangers. Potential customers wouldn't be coming from the stores.

I waited. They had seen me but they made no move to head my way.

'Good afternoon,' I called.

'Afternoon.' It was the taller of them, his tone so off-hand my good humour was ruffled.

They were making for the workshop.

'Can I help you?'

They stopped then, looking at me.

'Are you Bruce?' The shorter one in the overcoat this time. He wasn't bothering to be polite.

I told myself I might have been mistaken and if they were possible customers we couldn't afford to antagonize them.

'That's right,' I agreed.

They walked towards me. Slowly. As if they didn't welcome my interrupting whatever they were doing.

'We might be interested in buying this place,' Overcoat said. He had a strong Midlands accent. 'Your secretary told us you were out but it'd be all right for us to look round.'

Nancy had said that? I didn't believe him.

'I don't know who the hell you are,' I said evenly,

'but it isn't for sale and I don't much like your looking.'

They eyed each other.

'The agent told us—' the taller one began.

'When did you speak to them?'

'Yesterday morning, as soon as we saw the advertisement.'

They were beginning to look less confident.

'You'd better talk to them again. Maybe they've got a business that really is for sale.'

That didn't please them but I was in no mood to care.

'Look here,' Overcoat said aggressively, 'we saw the *Journal*.'

'We had nothing to do with the advertisement. It must have been a joke.' I smiled. 'I'm sorry if you've wasted your time.'

'Come on, Arthur,' the taller one said.

I thought his companion was going to say something else and I didn't blame him. After all, it wasn't their fault. But if he was, he changed his mind. They climbed into the Granada and drove off.

I went up to the office. Nancy looked up as I walked in.

'I thought you weren't coming back?' she remarked.

'Who were those two?' I demanded, ignoring the implied question.

She picked up a card from her desk and handed it to me. A company with an address in Walsall, A.

Roberts, Managing Director. The shorter one of the two. Unless both their Christian names started with 'A'.

'They said you told them it would be all right for them to look round,' I told Nancy.

'They *what*?' She looked furious. 'The damned cheek!'

'I don't suppose it matters.'

I went into my office. The second post was lying on my desk, one letter, from a firm in Surrey. They had decided not to proceed with the work for which we had tendered. Another, I thought. Fortunately it had been only a small job and we wouldn't have made much profit on it. But I didn't find it easy to be philosophical, the loss of any potential order had become a rebuff.

I rang Joyce Redding and asked her to bring in the cash book.

At five o'clock I heard the office staff leaving. A quarter of an hour later Nancy put her head round the door and asked if I needed her any more.

'No, I should go,' I told her.

'Goodnight, Neil.'

'Goodnight,' I said.

I heard the outer door close behind her and started making some notes.

CHAPTER TEN

Saturday. I stretched, climbed out of bed and drew back a corner of the curtain. It was snowing hard. I let the curtain fall back into place and went out to the hall. The morning paper was lying on the doormat and a banner headline leapt out at me: 'CRISIS TIME FOR INDUSTRY'. At least Bruces wasn't alone. I picked up the paper and took it back to bed.

But I didn't read it, I was thinking about Jennifer Peters. I had seen her twice and she was unlike any other girl I knew. Most of those I met hid behind a mask of shyness or determined sexuality, she seemed to have no time for that kind of reticence. Yet in spite of her directness there was a sort of reserve. I guessed that anyone who took her too much for granted would soon regret it. Being with her stimulated and relaxed me at the same time, her directness was a challenge, yet it had its own calmness, almost a serenity. I knew I was already half in love with her and knew at the same time it was hopeless.

I wondered why she had really come to Albridge yesterday. The way she had explained about bring-

ing some pictures had made it sound like an excuse. Had Roger asked her to come in the belief I would tell her more than I had him? If so, he was right. Perversely, the idea that she might only have come on his behalf depressed me. I decided it was time I got up.

All that morning I felt restless. I pottered about the flat doing odd jobs, unable to settle to anything for long. The snow stopped about eleven but a grey sky threatened more later and there was a keen east wind. At twelve o'clock I 'phoned the King's Head, booked a table for two at eight and went out for a pint and a snack at the White Lion.

Afterwards I drove round to the garage, filled up the Rover's tank and used the car wash. The bodywork was still in good shape and after the mud was washed off it almost glistened. There were one or two people in the sales department. I walked over and asked about new models and delivery dates, trying to convey the impression that price wasn't a major consideration. If the word got round that I was in a position to buy a new car it wouldn't do any harm. I left with a handful of brochures and the salesman's fervent hopes that I would return for a test drive.

On the way back to the flat I stopped at a florist's and bought some roses. They seemed a pretty conventional offering but I hoped Jennifer would like them.

Coming out of the shop I nearly collided with

Stella. She looked pinched and bad tempered and I guessed she wasn't enjoying the cold, she was too feline a creature for this weather. She saw me at the same moment and I saw the antagonism come into her eyes as she said 'Hallo, Neil.'

'Hello,' I said. 'Shopping?'

I was surprised to see her in Albridge on a Saturday, there was a market and people came in from the surrounding villages so that you had to almost fight your way along the pavements past the stalls.

'Yes,' she admitted grudgingly.

'I enjoyed the other evening.'

She stared at me angrily, as if she suspected I was up to something. I wondered what she had said when she found the dried up puddle of gin.

'Oh?'

'It was a good thing I didn't have much to drink, the police stopped me on the way back. Apparently some troublemaker had rung them and said I wasn't fit to drive. They weren't very pleased. I gather they may charge whoever it was. How's Max?'

'What the hell are you up to?' Stella demanded.

'Nothing. Why?'

'I knew there was something the other night. Why won't you let Max buy your shares? You know Bruces is going to crash but you'd rather smash your father's precious company than admit it.'

'If it's going to bust, why is Max so anxious to buy it?' I parried.

'Because it should be his. It would have been if your father hadn't been sorry for you. You aren't fit to run a business.'

People were turning to look at us.

'I'd rather it went smash than let a crook like Max get it,' I told her. 'You can tell him so from me.'

I walked away. And though I didn't look back I could feel her hatred following me.

It started snowing again just after six. I reckoned that the motorway would be clear but, if it was snowing there, the byroads between the turn off and the Peters' house would probably be treacherous. I decided to allow myself plenty of time. Even so, by the time I left there was already an inch of snow lying in the yard.

I drove up the hill past the pale bulk of the Regency town hall. The market stalls had been dismantled and the debris cleared away. Only a few pedestrians were braving the weather and the streets were almost eerily quiet, all sound muffled by the snow. It was falling faster now.

Towards the outskirts of the city the only signs of life were the lights in front room windows and an occasional car. Even the M1 was less busy than usual, it needed a pretty compelling reason for any driver to leave home this evening. The warning lights flashed '50', then '40'.

I passed a service area, its lights blazing but the big car park nearly empty. Beyond was open country.

Once I left the motorway snow was lying thick on the flat, winding roads and once or twice the Rover's tail twitched on a bend. My right leg ached from driving and the cold damp.

I had only been to the Peters' house that once and then I had approached it from a different direction and without paying much attention to its whereabouts. It might take me half an hour to find it in these conditions.

Then suddenly I saw it. There were lights over the big garage and in the porch and I wondered if Jennifer had switched them on.

Mrs Peters answered my ring. She was a very tall, angular woman with short grey hair and pleasant, rather humorous features that suggested she laughed a good deal.

'You must be Neil,' she greeted me. 'Come in, Jenny won't be a minute. Isn't it an awful night? She was afraid you wouldn't be able to come.'

I followed her into a large square room at the front of the house. It was very different from Max's and Stella's, furnished for comfort rather than style with big, old-fashioned settees and easychairs and a log fire was burning in the grate. Very different from my flat too.

'Do sit down.' Jennifer's mother perched on the arm of an easychair. Then she noticed the roses. 'Oh, aren't they gorgeous?'

I felt slightly ridiculous sitting there clutching them, then I heard the quick tap of heels outside in

the hall and Jennifer came in.

'Hallo,' she said. Her tone was carefully casual but whether for my sake or her mother's I couldn't tell. Mrs Peters was smiling.

I handed over the roses.

'Oh, they're lovely!' she exclaimed, looking at me over them with an expression I couldn't fathom in her eyes.

Her mother said she would put the roses in water and we went out to the car. Already snow was settling in the tracks the tyres had made only a few minutes ago.

Jennifer directed me along lanes overhung by the white skeletons of trees. I drove carefully and neither of us said much.

There was another wood fire at the pub, a four foot log burning slowly in the old brick fireplace. As we walked in a man stood up and kicked it, sending a shower of sparks up the chimney. I fetched our drinks and we sat, shoulders touching, for the bar was crowded, studying the menus a pretty young waitress brought.

After dinner we lingered over coffee and by the time we left the snow had stopped.

'Will you come in or would you rather drive straight home?' Jennifer asked when we reached the house.

I knew it would be more sensible to drive home now; if I didn't it might start snowing again and the byroads were treacherous enough already. I

decided not to think about that and went in with her.

The big room was deserted, coffee things set out on a trolley. A bit different from my jar of instant Nescafé beside the kettle on the kitchen table. Jennifer switched on the percolator.

My leg was hurting now, not a sharp pain but the nagging ache I was almost used to. There hadn't been a lot of room at the King's Head and I had sat with it bent back under my chair. One of these days, I supposed, I would learn. Jennifer noticed my limping.

'Is it bad?' she asked. There was sympathy in her voice but no pity. It was a subtle difference but it mattered.

'Just aches a bit,' I answered.

She didn't say anything else and I wondered bitterly how much of a barrier my bloody leg would be between us. While she attended to the coffee I sat at the end of a settee and watched her. I knew I wanted her so badly I daren't say anything for fear she would rebuff me. I couldn't risk that.

'Black or white?' she enquired.

'Black, please.'

She poured two cups and carried them over, handed me one and sat down facing me in an easy-chair.

'Come and sit here,' I said.

She shook her head. 'No.'

'Why not?'

'Reasons.'

'Don't you trust me to behave myself?' I grinned.

'Not you.'

I stared at her. That hadn't occurred to me.

'Why do men always think they're the only ones? This isn't the 19th century.' Her tone was mildly resentful. Then she added calmly, 'This may be the time but it isn't the place.'

'Sorry,' I said lightly.

'What the hell have you to apologize for?' She sipped her coffee, put her cup and saucer down on a table and walked over to the window, holding back the curtain to look out. 'Will you get home all right?'

'I expect so.'

'You could stay here; Roger would lend you a pair of his pyjamas.'

I wondered what I would look like in them. There would be room for Jennifer as well.

She looked at me over her shoulder. 'Do you sleep in pyjamas?'

'When I'm alone.'

It was her turn to look startled. If the silly reply seemed out of character she didn't know me yet. Then she smiled broadly. 'And when you're not?'

'Do you expect me to answer that? I'd be incriminating myself.'

She laughed and turned back to the window. 'Everything looks so lovely in the snow.'

'Yes.' I drank the rest of my coffee and put down

my cup. 'I'd better go.'

She nodded and came to the front door with me.

'Thank you for a super evening, Neil.'

'Another time?' I asked.

'Yes, please.'

'Soon?'

She nodded and kissed me briefly, a light brush of her lips. Then she turned quickly and the door closed behind her. I walked over to the Rover, my feet sinking into several inches of crisp snow.

It took me a quarter of an hour to reach the motorway but once on it the road was clear and I was able to drive faster. The Rover's headlights illuminated the two wide carriageways, dark ribbons of asphalt separated by a band of white stretching away into the darkness. I passed one or two cars and a few lorries but saw little other traffic. At the service area the car park was still nearly deserted. Then the sign for Albridge came up and I pulled across into the slow lane for the turning.

The streets were thick with slush and when I turned into the yard the snow tugged at the wheels, almost bringing the Rover to a halt. A moment more and the tyres gripped.

This time I saw the other set of tracks.

An old, rather battered Hillman was parked by the stores. I climbed out and walked over. The stores door was closed but it had been opened only a short time ago, there was an almost clear arc ending in a little ridge of snow where it had been

pulled back. I moved it an inch or two and listened.

Behind me a couple of streets away a car ground up the hill. At first that was all I heard. Then something moved inside the stores and metal scraped on the cement floor.

The next second there was a different sound. Whoever was in there had struck a match.

ELEVEN

In the snow-muffled silence the tiny sound was magnified ten fold. A pinpoint of light flickered ahead of me in the darkness, somewhere over by the far wall. I could make out two hands cupping it but everything else was lost in the shadows.

Why hadn't the intruder, whoever he was, brought a torch?

The next second the light flared higher and I saw why: he hadn't struck the match to see by. He was in the corner near the wreckage of the scaffold tower and he was bending over something. The light moved and I saw a pile of rubbish that hadn't been there when I was in the stores yesterday. He was holding the match to it. Something, paper, I supposed, caught and flared up, lighting his face. The thin features of Harry Lawrence.

There was inflammable stuff in the stores, cans of oil and paint, white spirit and a drum of paraffin. Not a great deal but enough to cause a serious fire. And some of the stuff on the shelves contained rubber and plastics. I could see a drum beside the pile, Lawrence must have poured paraffin on it.

For perhaps two seconds I stood there, then I started forward, shouting at him. My right leg, stiff from driving, dragged painfully. The racks themselves were metal and the floor was cement but there were timber beams across the ceiling and a pile of packing cases in that corner. If the fire wasn't put out, in a few minutes the whole stores would be alight. And not only the stores, the offices above them too. Maybe the whole building.

Lawrence heard my shout and looked up. I could see him crouching, his face startled in the light of the flames. He shot a quick glance over his shoulder but there was no escape that way, the rows of shelving blocked it.

When I was a few feet from him he snatched up something from the nearest rack and raised it above his head. I was taller and heavier but I knew that if it came to a fight my leg would outweigh those advantages.

As the flames burnt higher I could see what it was he was holding, a big spanner, at least fifteen inches long and very heavy. If that landed on my skull it would crush it, my only hope lay in rushing him and taking him off balance. It wasn't much of a chance but I couldn't think of anything else. I launched myself at him.

My leg made me unsteady and I couldn't have stopped myself if he had stepped aside. But he didn't, he was trapped between the racks with the fire behind him. He must have expected me to stop

when I saw the spanner and my headlong rush took him by surprise.

For a terrible moment I thought I had been too slow. I saw him start to swing the spanner down at my head and expected to feel the impact on my unprotected scalp. But it didn't come. As I landed on him he gasped and his knees buckled. His grip on the spanner loosened and it dropped, grazing my left shoulder before it hit the ground and clattered away.

Lawrence fell backwards on the fire with me on top of him. The flames were burning fiercely now, leaping round us. The heat seared my skin and singed my hair. Lawrence screamed. I could hear him gasping for breath and see his eyes staring close to mine. I tried to push myself up but my good leg was pinned under him. There was a sickening stench of paraffin.

'I'm burning,' he gabbled.

I managed to shove myself clear of him and roll over. He struggled to his feet, almost falling again in his panic. His clothes were smouldering and his hair was on fire.

'You bastard!' he shrieked. 'You bloody bastard!' He was almost crying, beside himself with fear. His hands beat ineffectually at his hair. Then he kicked out wildly at me.

I was lying on the cement just clear of the flames. I saw his boot coming and tried to roll out of the way but with my bad leg I was too slow. The boot caught

me in the ribs and I gasped with pain.

As if through a haze I heard him run off and saw the flames playing round him. The door slammed shut and I was alone with the fire. I felt sick.

My ribs and my right leg hurt so badly that for a few seconds I hardly felt the heat. Then the first shock passed and I realized the flames were burning my hands and my own clothes were smouldering. I breathed in the thick oily fumes and choked. The fire was already licking at the piles of packing cases, any second now they would start burning. If they fell I was right underneath. And I couldn't move.

For a moment stark terror gripped me. Maybe it was partly the effects of Lawrence's kick. Then it passed. Gritting my teeth against the pain, I gathered my strength and rolled over, well away from the fire.

I just laid there, thankful for the coolness of the cement under me and the respite from the blistering heat of the fire. But I knew I had to get out. Already the flames were reaching up to the beams across the ceiling.

Grasping the edge of the nearest rack, I hauled myself to my feet. When I put my right leg to the ground the pain made me gasp but at least I could move. Lawrence had carried several cans of paint and poured their contents on the fire. But he had been in a hurry and a lot of the paint was left in the cans, spilling messily across the floor. I kicked them out of range of the flames and they rolled noisily

across the cement, leaving a sticky trail.

There was an extinguisher on the wall near the door. Pulling myself hand over hand, trying to avoid putting any weight on my bad leg, I limped over and switched on the light. It took some of the intensity out of the glare but I knew that was an illusion, the fire was no less dangerous. By now the oily fumes filled the whole stores but I daren't open the door for fear the draught would fan the flames.

I looked for the extinguisher, unable to believe what I saw. For where it had hung there was only a blank wall. The bracket was still there, empty. Lawrence must have taken it before he lit the fire. I swore bitterly from anger and frustration.

There was a toilet with a wash basin at the end of the building, perhaps there was a bucket there. There wasn't. Desperate now, I looked on the shelves and the floor. No bucket, nothing that would hold water. There was nothing for it, I would have to call the fire service.

Choking, I limped to the door. Outside the snow was lying inches deep in the yard. All that water, I thought, and no way of carrying it to the fire. The cold air struck me with an almost physical force and for a few seconds I leant against the wall, gulping it in until my head cleared. Then I pulled myself together and walked across to the flat door. Two flights of stairs. When I moved into the flat I had had some vague idea that the exercise might strengthen my leg. I must have been mad.

Half crawling, I dragged myself up and fumbled in my pocket for the key. The telephone was on a table in the living-room; I almost fell on it and dialled 999.

The fire tender arrived in three minutes flat. I stood outside in the yard and watched the men go to work. Another ten minutes and the fire was out. All that remained was a charred heap in one corner and a stench. Plus a lot of mess.

The officer in charge drew me to one side. 'Do you know how it started?' he asked.

It was too dark for him to see me properly and I didn't look at him. I had already made up my mind not to say anything about Lawrence. Not much real damage had been done and I couldn't risk the effect it might have on my mother if it all came out.

'No,' I lied.

'Seems a bit odd, stone floor and that. There wouldn't have been anyone working in there, would there? Not at this time of night?'

It was Saturday.

'No,' I repeated.

'Oily rags and paper soon catch fire. And there were some cans.'

I wondered why he didn't say it right out, he must have smelt the paraffin.

'They were stacked there,' I told him. 'I managed to clear some of them out of the way of the fire before I called you.'

'Yes, I saw.'

Why didn't he ask about the extinguisher? He knew there must have been one. Or should have been, we had a fire certificate.

'These things happen,' I said. 'Maybe there was a short.'

He eyed me curiously. Until now, I thought, he had assumed I thought the fire had started accidentally. He had been breaking it to me gently that he wasn't satisfied. Now he knew I suspected it hadn't; I must know there was no wiring in that corner, only bare bricks and a cement floor. I wondered what he would do about it.

'It's made a mess and there's no real damage,' I said.

'It was lucky you saw it.'

'I'd just come home.'

The firemen and their equipment had churned the snow into a slushy mess, obliterating Lawrence's tracks.

'It could have been kids,' he suggested.

'I suppose so,' I agreed.

'Was the door open?'

'It wasn't locked.' That depended on what he meant. It had been locked until Lawrence came.

He trudged through the slush. 'It's been forced, the lock's torn nearly out of the wood.'

I wished he would mind his own business. But I knew it was his business and if I tried to fend him off it would only make matters worse.

'There's not much we can do about it now,' I said.

'No, I expect you're right.' He sounded reluctant. I don't suppose he approved of youngsters breaking into buildings and starting fires. Neither did I. Especially youngsters of fifty who were obeying orders.

In the end they left. I climbed the stairs and let myself into the flat. I felt drained, physically and mentally. My skin seemed to be on fire and my ribs ached, all I wanted was to sleep.

After five minutes I heaved myself to my feet and went into the bathroom. My reflection in the mirror was a shock. My face was red and the skin had a dry, shiny look while my eyebrows had almost disappeared and the front inch or two of my hair was singed. At the best of times my looks weren't the sort to be vain about but it was a blow for all that.

My suit was ruined, it had scorch marks all over it and there was a big hole with charred edges in the left shoulder of the jacket. For the first time I noticed the bitter scent of burnt cloth. My shirt wasn't much better. I undressed, threw the suit into a corner and had a bath.

After that I felt better. My skin was still tender and there was a nasty bruise coming up over my ribs but they would pass given a few days. Luckily nothing seemed to be broken. I donned pyjamas and a dressing-gown, remembering Jennifer, lit the gas fire and poured myself a stiff Scotch.

It was fortunate I had returned when I had, another five minutes and the fire would have gained

a hold. Lawrence wouldn't have known I rarely went out in the evening but Max did. He must have counted on my being in bed by then. The windows in the flat didn't overlook the stores and it would have been some time before I noticed anything wrong. By then the whole building would have been burning.

And if I was asleep it might have been too late.

But I was pretty sure Max hadn't intended me to be killed, his strategy was more subtle than that. He knew that if the fire caused much damage the police would be bound to investigate how it had started. After what the fire officer had said they still might. That was why Lawrence had made no attempt to conceal what he had done. Just the opposite, he had drawn attention to it by leaving the paraffin drum and the other cans where he had started his fire. The dullest policeman would have been bound to suspect arson and after all the stories about the company's financial troubles there would have been only one suspect: me. I would have had to make a claim on the insurance company and following so soon after the others for the accident at Finlays and the theft of the equipment from the lorry they wouldn't have been exactly delighted, even without any suspicious circumstances.

I had thwarted the plan by coming home when I did but I felt no satisfaction. Maybe I was too tired. Three hours ago I had been on top of the world, now I was back to rock bottom again. No, not quite

rock bottom, because now I knew who was behind everything that had happened lately and the fight was out in the open.

But it was a fight where Max held all the weapons.

The next morning I set about clearing up the mess. When I opened the stores door I was greeted by a stench of paraffin and wet ashes that nearly turned my stomach but considering the intensity of the fire, it was surprising how little damage it had caused. Most of it was superficial. The ceiling and walls were blackened in that corner and some of the beams were slightly charred but not badly enough to need replacing. The paint on the shelving was blistered and some of the stores were fit for nothing but scrap but not very much. That was all. That and the pools of water everywhere.

At the end of a couple of hours' hard work things looked a good deal tidier and cleaner and I had fitted a new lock on the door. Lawrence was hardly likely to return and it seemed a bit like locking the stable door after the horse had bolted but there was always a chance some kids would walk in and help themselves if it wasn't secured. Lawrence was probably a hundred miles away by now, he would expect me to go to the police. Then I remembered he was a Londoner, he had most likely gone to ground there. I wondered who Max would find to do his dirty work now. There must have been other men in-

volved in the hi-jacking; clearly he had contacts.

I went back to the flat, found a pork pie in the fridge and ate it for lunch with some pickled onions and a can of beer. As a meal it hardly compared with dinner at the King's Head but it was all I needed.

While I ate I thought about what I knew and suspected. Why did Max suddenly want control of Bruces so badly? It was nearly two years since our father died. True, he had been bitter at first and his apparent acceptance afterwards might have been only a pretence. But even if that was the case, he had waited a long time without doing anything, it was only a few months ago he had talked me into agreeing the company should buy the freehold of the works. Now this campaign of rumours and acts calculated to force Bruces into a corner and to make my position impossible.

After last night I was more than ever convinced it was Lawrence who had attacked me in the stores before. And that what had happened at Finlays had been no accident.

I remembered Max sitting on Nancy's desk while I told them the next morning. He had pretended to be shocked but even at the time I had noticed he didn't seem really surprised. It was only when he heard that Bob Gurney was dead the shock came, he hadn't been prepared for that.

The question remained, why now?

I puzzled over it for a long time but at the end I

still hadn't come up with a convincing answer.

The telephone rang and I went across to answer it. When I heard Jennifer's voice my spirits rose.

'I rang this morning,' she told me, 'but you weren't there.'

'I was clearing up. We had a bit of a fire in the stores last night.'

'Oh no! Are you all right?' No noticeable anxiety there, only a matter-of-fact enquiry. No good looking for implications.

'Fine. It wasn't much.'

'Oh good. I rang to see if you got home all right.'

'That was nice of you. It wasn't too bad, the M1 was clear.'

'That's all right then.'

I damned the telephone as the most unsatisfactory means of communication known to man, then remembered that if it hadn't existed I wouldn't be talking to her now.

There was a few seconds' awkward silence.

'Jennifer,' I said, 'I . . .' Then I stopped, afraid of telling her. Or how she would react if I did.

There was a slight pause before she said, 'Yes?'

'Nothing,' I told her. 'Another time.'

'All right.'

'When shall I see you again?'

'I don't know. I must go now, give me a ring some time. 'Bye.'

'Bye,' I said.

I put the 'phone down feeling as if I had fallen a

long way very fast. At least I hadn't told her what I had been on the point of saying.

The *Sunday Times* was lying on the table. I picked it up and took it over to an easychair but after five minutes I couldn't remember a thing I had read. I tried to put Jennifer out of my mind and think about Max instead. It was a poor exchange but suddenly I thought I could see why he might want Bruces so badly. It seemed unlikely, to say the least, but it was possible and I couldn't afford to ignore any possibility, however remote.

If I was right, I could see a way of fighting back. I fetched my coat and went down to the garage.

That evening I walked round to the nursing home. My mother was sitting propped up in bed watching a television programme.

'Turn it off, darling,' she said. She had taken to using endearments more often lately. At one time they would have embarrassed me, now I found them slightly pathetic. Strangely, Max had never seemed to mind; nothing my mother did interested him unless it affected his own wellbeing.

'Don't you want to watch it?' I asked.

'No. I can't think why they show some of these programmes. How are you?'

'Fine.' I pressed the on/off button on the set and the picture disappeared. Mother had only a table lamp beside her bed switched on and I kept away from it as far as I could, hoping she wouldn't see my

face. 'You're looking better.' Better than the last time I came, still pitifully frail.

'I feel much better.' She tried to smile brightly but it was clear something was worrying her. If Stella had come again I would have something to say to Matron. Perhaps Max had come himself this time.

'Darling, I've decided to make a new will.'

I was startled. Whatever it was she had on her mind, I hadn't expected that. She had executed a new will after my father died and, as far as I knew, hadn't changed it. I knew that except for a few small bequests to friends and two thousand pounds to Max, she had left everything to me. I wondered how she proposed to change it now.

'Oh!' I said.

'I didn't want you to feel hurt.'

'Why should I? It's your money.'

All the same, I couldn't help wondering.

'I've decided to leave my shares in the company to Max.'

It was like a physical blow. Whatever she had decided, it hadn't occurred to me she might do that.

'I think it's what your father would have wanted,' she explained. 'And Max is such a good businessman. I know he feels he shouldn't interfere when he's got such a small holding and I'm sure he'll be able to help you more if he has my shares.'

'Did he tell you so?'

She looked distressed. 'Oh no, dear. I haven't said a word to him yet.'

There was nothing I could say, they were her shares and she could do what she liked with them. If she wanted to leave them to Max I wouldn't try to dissuade her. Not even now I knew what he was doing; I daren't take that risk.

'Think about it,' I suggested, 'there's no hurry.'

She smiled wanly but with something like a flash of her old humour. My mother had a quiet, unshakeable belief in a benevolent God and death held no terrors for her, she looked forward to meeting my father again without doubt or uncertainty. Sometimes I envied her.

'I wanted to tell you before I said anything to Max,' she said. 'Now I can write to him tomorrow.'

'You're tired,' I told her. She had been worrying about breaking it to me and now the reaction had come.

'Yes, I am rather,' she admitted.

'I'll go.'

She smiled and I kissed her cheek. It was soft and limp, as if the life was already beginning to ebb away.

A nurse crossed the hall as I reached the foot of the stairs. She looked calm and capable. I said goodnight and walked home.

I hadn't let my mother see I was scared but I knew that if she told Max what she proposed doing she was putting herself in his hands. And he knew a

severe shock might kill her. I toyed with the idea of going to see old Burroughs, her solicitor, and explaining everything. But he would think I was imagining it all or, worse, that I was motivated by jealousy. He might even tell her.

It was only later I realized that, as things stood, if I died first my shares would go to her. It might be a good idea for me to make a new will myself.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The next morning's post brought a cheque for £800 from British Rail. I took my letters into my office, closed the door and rang Hadley at the bank. He said he could see me at ten.

The pavements were still slippery with half-thawed slush. It was a mild, grey morning, the almost inevitable consequence of the weekend's Christmas card prettiness, and people floundered along looking bad tempered.

Hadley's secretary showed me into his office. It was a pleasant room with sporting prints on the walls and a window that looked across a garden to the abbey.

'I haven't come about the account,' I explained.

If he was relieved he didn't show it, he just sat there waiting, a comfortable-looking man in his middle fifties. I almost envied him but no doubt he had his problems too.

'I'd like you to make some enquiries about these companies,' I told him.

I handed him the list I had made yesterday afternoon. There were seven names on it, taken from the plates outside the door of Max's offices.

Hadley took the list and studied it. 'Do you know

where they bank?' he asked.

'No.'

'It'll take several days then. We shall have to find out before we can get reports.'

I had hoped he could get the information within a couple of days.

'It may be the Southern and Provincial at Finchley. If it isn't, they'll probably know.' Max kept his personal accounts there.

'Leave it with me,' Hadley said. 'I'll see what we can do.'

I thanked him and went out to the counter to cash a cheque. The pretty young cashier knew me and gave me a bright smile. I began to feel more cheerful.

Nancy looked up as I entered the office. It occurred to me she didn't smile much these days, no doubt if the men had heard the stories about Bruces she had too. I decided to tell her what I had told Wally. But not just yet. Anyway, her worries might be more personal.

'There's a Mr Peters in your room,' she said. 'He came a few minutes ago.'

Roger, I thought. I wondered why he had come.

When I went in he was standing looking out of the window.

'Hallo,' I said, shaking hands and taking off my coat.

'Hallo there.' His cheeriness had a muted note, as if he was embarrassed.

'What brings you here?' I asked him.

He shifted uneasily in his chair. 'I've been thinking about what you told me the other day.'

I couldn't remember what I had told him. Not specifically.

'What about?' I asked.

'This fellow who's spreading the stories about Bruces, do you know who he is yet?'

I hesitated. 'I've a good idea.'

Still he waited, looking uncomfortable. Then he came out with it. 'If you had five thousand in cash it would help, wouldn't it?'

I stared at him. Whatever I had expected, it wasn't this.

'Of course it would,' I agreed. There was no point in denying it.

'You could pay your suppliers and stop the stories.'

'Yes.'

It would help like the kiss of life to a dying man. It wouldn't stop Max but it would give us a breathing space and make things more difficult for him. He couldn't go on lighting fires and hi-jacking our lorries for ever.

'Our cash flow position's pretty good just now, why don't you let us help? Just on a temporary basis.'

It was good of him. He had gone out of his way to help and part of me wanted to accept. I knew I owed it to the company and the people who worked

for it. But I knew also that I wouldn't. Maybe I had no right to refuse but I would all the same.

'It's very good of you,' I told him. 'I'm very grateful.'

'Rubbish. Plenty of people need help once in a while. Bruces is too good a business to be ruined by that sort of lousy trick.'

'Thanks, Roger,' I said, 'but the answer's "No".'

It was his turn to gape at me. 'Why?'

I hesitated. Because I was too proud to accept. Partly that. And partly because this was a private war between Max and me. But I couldn't tell him that.

'Has Jennifer been talking to you?' I asked.

'She mentioned something,' he admitted.

'It was her idea you came, wasn't it?'

'In a way. But I was all in favour of it, she didn't have to twist my arm. Look, it would be a straightforward business deal. You could pay us interest if that would make you feel better.'

'No,' I said again.

'Why on earth not? You agree it would help.' He paused. 'I suppose you think it would be like taking charity? That's just being pig-headed.'

'Probably,' I agreed.

He was annoyed now. I knew he hadn't enjoyed coming.

'What happens if you go to the wall?'

'We shan't.'

'Can you be sure of that?'

'Not absolutely.' How could I be? Except that I didn't think Max intended we should. Not quite.

'I wish she hadn't said anything,' I muttered. 'It's very kind of you both but we don't need help. Not that badly.'

He sighed. 'All right.'

I knew he wasn't pleased and I didn't blame him. He had seen a way of helping a friend, wanted to help, and I had thrown the offer back in his face. It was Jennifer's offer too, in a way. She would probably mind more than Roger. Damn!

He stood up and walked across to the door.

'I really am grateful,' I told him, 'and I know what you're thinking. It's just that I'd rather find my own way out of all this if I can.'

'It's up to you.' He grinned suddenly. 'Let me know if you change your mind.'

'I will.' It was generous of him to leave the offer open. 'There may be another way you can help.'

'What's that?'

'I'm not sure yet.'

'Well tell me if there is.'

'I will,' I promised again.

He went striding away along the passage to the stairs. He didn't know what it was all about, I thought. With ordinary luck he never would, life was generally kind to people like Roger.

I returned to my office and for the next hour or so did some routine work. But I was uneasy. I knew I had let pride overcome my better judgement and

that was an almost unforgiveable error in business. Worse, Jennifer would almost certainly be angry that I had spurned her brother's offer.

At last, unable to concentrate, I pushed the work aside and thought about what I intended doing. I had a plan of sorts but I wasn't at all sure it was feasible. It was very probably illegal. In the end I rang George Francis, my solicitor, and went to see him.

George was the junior partner in one of the leading firms in Albridge. We had been at school together and, more recently, in the same fifteen. Looking at him it was hard to see him as a respectable lawyer and his friends were inclined to claim he only woke up in a scrum but his easygoing exterior masked a good brain and more than a trace of ruthlessness.

I told him most of the story. Apart from a couple of startled exclamations he listened in silence. Then I explained what I wanted to do. When I had finished he grinned appreciatively.

'I can't see anything against it,' he said. 'It's an arm's length deal, you haven't any connection with them?'

'No.'

'If Bruces went into liquidation the liquidator might ask some awkward questions but I doubt if he'd get far. The minority shareholders might get nasty, too.'

'How?'

'They might start proceedings.'

The only minority shareholders were my mother, Max and Wally Thompson. I couldn't see Wally doing anything but Max might. Only I didn't think he could afford to wait that long.

'That would take time, wouldn't it?' I asked.

'Oh yes,' George agreed cheerfully.

'Thanks, that's all I wanted to know.'

He came to the door with me. 'The best of luck, Neil.'

'Thanks,' I said.

I walked back to the works feeling surprisingly light hearted, all things considered. At least I was doing something positive instead of waiting submissively for Max's next blow to fall.

I didn't go straight to the office. Instead I went up to the flat and spent several minutes on the 'phone talking to a man I knew named Alastair Durie. Alastair was a financial journalist on one of the national dailies, he lived near Albridge and we had met repeatedly over the years at parties and other events because we had a number of mutual friends. I knew him well enough to ask him to do something for me and when I explained what it was he promised to see what he could do.

'I don't know if I'll be able to find out much,' he warned me. 'It isn't as if he was a big name.'

'I know that.'

'I'll try, anyway. Where shall I ring you?'

I gave him the flat number and he promised to

call me back that evening if he had been successful. I thanked him and went down to the office.

Jennifer arrived at half-past four wearing the pale sheepskin coat and a set expression.

'Well?' she demanded as soon as the door of my room was shut.

I wondered unhappily if this would be the last time we saw each other and for a moment I wished I had accepted Roger's offer.

'I'm mad,' she announced warmly. She sounded it.

'I'm sorry.'

'Not with you, with Roger. Why did he have to tell you it was my idea?'

'He didn't, I guessed.'

'Oh.' Her anger faded a little. 'Now I suppose you're furious with me?'

'Why should I be?'

'Aren't you?'

'No, of course not.'

'I thought you would be. I know you. At least . . .' She looked confused, as if she hadn't intended saying that.

'I know, I'm a stubborn, bloody-minded fool. It was very good of you both and I'm grateful. Really.'

'I didn't want you to be grateful.'

'Well, I am. I was afraid you wouldn't understand why I said no.'

She half-smiled. A wry grin. 'I rather expected you would.'

'Roger said I was pig-headed.'

'You are. And proud.'

'Probably.'

She paused. Then in a different tone she asked, 'Is it really going to be all right, Neil?'

'Why did people ask me that? I didn't know. But I was glad she had asked all the same.

'With a bit of luck,' I answered.

'I hope it is.' She sounded genuinely concerned, as if it mattered to her. 'If so, I'm glad you wouldn't take it.'

We were standing very close, so that I could smell her perfume.

'You were going to say something on the 'phone yesterday,' she reminded me quietly. 'What was it?'

I wished she hadn't asked. I couldn't tell her now with all this hanging over me. It couldn't lead anywhere, just make everything even more complicated than it already was. And, heaven knew, that was bad enough. It had been another stupid impulse.

'Nothing,' I muttered.

For a moment she just looked at me, not saying anything. Then she sighed. 'You are proud.'

'Look—' I began.

'There's nothing more to say, is there? I only came because I was so mad with Roger and I wanted to explain.'

'You didn't have to,' I said, meaning explain. Perhaps she thought I meant come.

'No, I can see that.' She sounded bitter and I felt every sort of fool. But I knew trying to explain wouldn't be any good. 'I'd better go, I'm stopping you working.'

'No, don't,' I said.

'It would be better if I did. There's not much point my staying, is there?'

'We could have dinner,' I suggested.

She shook her head. 'I don't think so, Neil. Not tonight.'

If not tonight, then when? I was horribly afraid that if I let her go now I might not see her again.

'I wish you would,' I told her.

She hesitated. 'All right. I expect I'm being a fool and I'm sure it would be better if I went.'

'Do you want to go?'

She gave me a look I couldn't understand. Or dared not.

'Oh, you are a bloody fool,' she said, half laughing. 'I'll stay but we won't go out, I'll get something in the flat. What are the shops like here?'

I grinned. Life was good again. 'They stock a good line in baked beans.'

This time she laughed aloud. 'Give me an hour then,' she said.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

She was back in forty minutes, loaded with parcels.

'How much longer will you be here?' she asked.

'I could jack it in now,' I answered. Could, but shouldn't, this job ought to be finished today.

'Don't you dare!' she told me. 'I want to be left in peace for the next hour at least.'

'That'll give me time to finish this.' I handed her my flat key. Then, as she walked back to the door I remembered something. 'Jen.'

'Yes?'

'Don't use the table lamp in the living-room, it's dangerous.' There were bare wires near the switch and the switch itself was broken. Like the window and door here, it was something I had never got round to doing; it was easier simply not to use the lamp.

'Okay,' Jennifer said. She picked up her parcels and departed.

It was more than an hour before I finished what I was doing and Nancy and the rest of the staff had long since gone home. I turned off the lights, locked up and went upstairs to the flat.

When I entered the living-room I stopped dead.

It was transformed; Jennifer had rearranged the furniture so that now the table occupied the centre of the room. It was laid with a new white cloth and the silver on it gleamed as it hadn't done for years. The pair of rather nice old silver candlesticks I never used held tall red candles.

Then I turned and saw the picture. It was hanging on the wall facing the fire, a painting of an old pub in the snow against a wintry sunset. Something about it seemed familiar; I looked closer and realized it was the Trusty Servant at the bottom of the lane past the Cathedral. Jennifer and I had walked that way back from the lake three days ago. I wondered where she had found the picture and who had painted it. Then I saw the signature in the bottom corner: 'J. Peters'.

I heard a movement behind me and turned. She was standing in the kitchen doorway watching me uncertainly. Her sweater and skirt were mostly concealed by a shiny apron printed with a design of wine labels and she had done something different to her hair, it was hanging loose to her shoulders.

'It's great,' I said.

She knew I meant the picture. 'It isn't. But it isn't too bad; I did it in rather a hurry. Do you like it? Honestly?'

'Very much. Honestly. When did you paint it?'

'Yesterday.'

I was startled. That hadn't occurred to me. 'You mean you—'

'I came over in the afternoon—after I 'phoned you.'

'Why didn't you say anything?'

'I wanted it to be a surprise.'

'Surprise?'

'It's a present. If you want it.'

I didn't know what to say, I had assumed she had brought the picture just to show it to me. The hell with my good resolutions, I put my arms round her and kissed her. To my delight she didn't resist, she kissed me back, then laughed and dodged away.

'Dinner will spoil.'

'How could you frame it so quickly?' I asked. 'I thought oils took some time to dry?'

'It isn't oils, it's acrylics.' She glanced round the room. 'You don't mind my moving things round?'

'It's a vast improvement.'

'I know men don't like their belongings being moved. I was afraid you might object. Not say anything, just mind.'

'I don't,' I assured her truthfully.

'You can put them back later if you want to. I used your 'phone, too, that was all right, wasn't it?'

'Feel free,' I told her.

She grinned and went into the kitchen. There was a delicious aroma of cooking. And it wasn't baked beans or cheese on toast.

'Can I come and watch?' I called.

'No, I want to keep my mind on what I'm doing. I'm damned if I'm going to have it ruined after all

the trouble I've taken.'

There didn't seem much I could usefully do so I sat down and started reading the evening paper. Five minutes later Alastair Durie 'phoned.

'That chap you asked me to find out about,' he said, 'is he any relation of yours?'

'Half-brother,' I told him.

'Oh.' I could almost feel his embarrassment.

'It's all right,' I said, 'I know what he's like.'

'Oh good. Well, as far as I can discover he made quite a killing asset-stripping in the good old days. He wasn't in the big league but he did very nicely.'

'Nothing illegal in that,' I commented.

'Oh no. When the property boom started he moved in there. But he was greedy and when the market crashed he got his fingers burnt. Badly. Or so rumour has it. According to what I hear, he needs cash fast. A lot of it.'

'Would a sound little business with plenty of assets help if he could pick it up cheap?' I asked.

'I should think so.'

'Anything else?'

'Well, he's supposed to be trying to pull off a deal with some Saudis but there are a lot of other people in the running and the general idea is that he hasn't a hope. Anyway, that sort of deal usually takes a long time before it comes off.'

And Max hadn't much time.

'Thanks,' I said.

'It's a pleasure. I must say, from one or two things

I've heard, I'm glad he's your half-brother, not mine.'

'You should be,' I told him.

Jennifer came out of the kitchen as I was replacing the receiver and we sat down to dinner. The meal was superb and with it we drank a bottle of claret I had been keeping for the next time friends came. Afterwards we cleared away the dirty things and washed up together.

'Do you want to go out anywhere?' I asked when it was done.

Jennifer shook her head. 'Not this evening. Unless you do.'

I didn't, I much preferred the prospect of staying here alone with her. I sat down at one end of the settee, remembering that other evening at her home. But this time she sat beside me, kicking off her shoes and wriggling her toes.

'That's better,' she murmured.

The shoes had very high stiletto heels. It occurred to me I had never seen her not wearing high heels, even her boots had them, and I wondered if it was vanity.

'Why do you wear heels like that?' I asked.

She stood up, reaching out a hand to pull me up beside her. To my surprise, her head hardly reached my chin. I hadn't realized before how short she was.

'That's why,' she said. 'You've seen the rest of our family, they're all over six feet, even my

mother. When I was a kid Roger used to call me Tich; he still does when he wants to annoy me. I hated being short, it was as if there was something wrong with me, so when I was fourteen I went out and bought the highest heels I could find.'

I laughed.

'It wasn't funny, I used to go round with a permanent crick in my neck looking up at people.'

'I'm five feet eight,' I told her.

'Don't ever try looking down at me, Neil.'

If it was a warning I didn't care. 'I won't,' I promised.

'I think I'll stick to high heels, just to make sure.'

She sat down again and pulled me down beside her. Her body was soft and supple.

'What time do you have to go?' I asked after a while.

Jennifer moved her head a few inches from mine. 'Do you want me to go?'

'No.'

'Good. That's why I used your 'phone, I hoped you'd want me to stay.'

I turned over on to my back. It was still dark. I reached out for Jennifer but she wasn't there, though her side of the bed was still warm. I said her name quietly. No answer.

She must be in the bathroom. I rolled back on to my side and looked at my watch. It wasn't quite seven-thirty.

'Jen!' I called, louder this time.

Nothing. Not even a car in the street disturbed the silence. I felt the first stirrings of concern. She hadn't left without waking me, surely?

I switched on the light and saw her handbag on the dressing-table. Climbing out of bed, I pulled on a dressing-gown and padded along to the bathroom. She wasn't there. Nor in the living-room or the kitchen, though there was a frying-pan on the cooker with bacon sizzling gently in it.

I returned to the bedroom. Last night she had left her clothes on a chair beside the bed, now they were gone. So were her shoes. But her coat was still hanging in the wardrobe next to mine. She must have slipped out for a few minutes and not bothered with it. I picked up my shaver and went back to the bathroom.

Ten minutes later when I came out she still hadn't returned. The bacon was beginning to curl. I turned it and moved the cooker switch to a lower setting. Where was she? She couldn't have gone shopping, it was too early, and, anyway, she hadn't taken her handbag. She must have gone down to her car, I had better see if anything was wrong.

I saw her as soon as I opened the door. She was lying huddled in a heap at the bottom of the stairs. Two long flights straight down.

Those bloody stupid shoes! I thought. The stairs were tricky enough for anyone, a death trap for a girl perched on those four inch heels.

Death trap. Fear wrapped itself round my heart, cold.

I started down as fast as I could go, cursing my awkwardness. On the third step I felt my feet slipping away from under me and flung out my right arm, groping desperately for the bannisters. My weight was carrying me forward.

It was an instinctive action but my hand touched wood and I grasped it. My weight, falling, tugged at my shoulder but I held on. Then, slowly, I hauled myself upright again. I had to do it all with my arms, my feet couldn't get any grip on the carpet, they kept sliding outwards, away from the stairs. Cautiously, holding on to the bannister rail, I descended the rest of the two flights.

Jennifer was lying partly on her left side, her legs pulled up. I bent over her fearfully. At least she was still breathing. And when I felt her pulse, though it was faint, it seemed steady.

I didn't know whether I should carry her up to the flat or leave her where she was until the doctor came. I was worried she might have suffered some serious injury that wasn't apparent to my inexpert eye like a fractured skull.

Then she stirred and her eyelids flickered.

'Neil,' she murmured.

'I'm here.'

'I tripped.'

'Are you all right?' I asked her. Only afterwards I realized it was a stupid question.

'I think so.' She tried to sit up and I put my hands out to help her. 'Ooh!'

'Stay there for a minute,' I told her. 'I'll ring the doctor.'

'No, I'll be okay in a minute or two.'

'Can you move your arms and legs?'

She could, though from her grimace her legs hurt pretty badly.

'I'll be back in a minute,' I said.

'Where are you going?'

'Only upstairs.'

'Don't ring the doctor, Neil. Please. I can't stand fusses.'

'All right, if you're sure,' I agreed. But I wondered if I should call him just the same.

I climbed up to the third step. The carpet was pulled away from the tacks of both grippers on that and the step below and the individual tacks along the edge were missing. Near the front edge of the steps there were cuts in the carpet and the edges of the cuts were turned up. I looked at the back; the slits were neat, as if they had been made with a knife.

They probably had. I supposed it was just possible the carpet might have come away from the grippers, unlikely though it seemed, but the tacks were long and they had been in ever since I moved into the flat, they couldn't have come out of their own accord. Somebody had eased the carpet off the grippers, pulled out the tacks and then made those

slits, turning up the edges. There was only a dim light on the top landing, too dim for anyone to see what had been done. With the carpet loosened and handicapped by my bad leg, if I had caught my toe in one of those cuts it was long odds on my pitching down the rest of the two flights. And that could have put me out of action for weeks. It was sheer luck I had been able to save myself just now.

I went up the rest of the way to the flat and fetched a hammer and some tacks. When I was satisfied the carpet was safe again, I returned to Jennifer. She still looked pale and shaken and when I lifted her in my arms she didn't protest. Though she was no great weight, carrying her up the two flights with my bad leg was a laborious business. I laid her down on the settee and removed her shoes carefully in case she had broken or sprained an ankle. She didn't wince but it would probably take an X-ray to be sure there was no damage.

I left her there, went into the kitchen and boiled a kettle to make some tea. I had switched off the bacon when I fetched the hammer, it was cooked hard. I made the tea strong, waited a few minutes, then poured a cup and put plenty of sugar in it before I took it to Jennifer.

'Drink that,' I told her.

She sipped it obediently, grimacing at its sweetness. I knew that normally she didn't take sugar.

'How do you feel now?' I asked her.

'A bit shaken, that's all.' She smiled wrily. 'I

suppose you'll say it was my fault for wearing those heels?'

I shook my head. 'It wasn't them.'

'What do you mean?' She was holding the cup and looking up at me with a puzzled little frown.

'Somebody loosened the carpet and cut it,' I said.

'On purpose?' Even now she found it hard to believe.

'Yes. It was all right yesterday.'

'But that means . . .' Her eyes were horrified. 'They must have meant you to fall.'

'It looks like it.'

'The same person who wants to buy Bruces?'

I grinned. 'I hadn't thought there might be two people who disliked me so much.'

She ignored my attempt at humour. 'Do you know who it is?'

'Max, my half-brother.'

'Oh no!' She stared at me. 'But why?'

I told her.

'There must be some way of stopping him. Have you been to the police?'

'No.'

'You must. Next time . . .' She didn't need to finish the sentence.

'I can't. In any case, there's no proof, they wouldn't believe me.'

'They'd have to now.'

'A worn carpet, what sort of proof is that? But it's my mother, she's had two heart attacks already, if

she heard about Max the shock would probably kill her.'

'Would it be any better for her to have you killed?' Jennifer demanded.

'I don't think he meant to kill me, just put me out of action for a while. I know I'm not the world's best businessman but that wouldn't help the company just now.'

Perhaps he had intended to kill me. I couldn't be sure. Something warned me that the fight had taken a new, more deadly turn. Maybe Max had decided that was the only way he could get my shares.

'You can't just sit back and let him do what he likes to you,' Jennifer protested. She sounded stronger now and her warmth had brought some colour back to her cheeks.

'I don't intend to,' I told her.

'What are you going to do?'

I explained. 'I'll need Roger's help. After yesterday I don't like asking him.'

'Don't be silly, he'll enjoy helping.'

When she spoke like that I believed her.

The bacon was past salvation; we breakfasted on toast and marmalade, then Jennifer declared she must drive to work. I insisted she stayed where she was, at least for a couple of hours. To my surprise, she submitted without further argument and I wondered if she felt groggier than she was prepared to admit.

I promised I would come back before mid-morn-

ing, extracted an undertaking she wouldn't leave until I did and went down to the office, leaving her to telephone her mother and the college.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I was still dealing with my post when the messenger from the bank delivered an envelope addressed to me and marked 'Private and Confidential'. I slit it open. Inside were seven forms, the replies to Hadley's enquiries about Max's companies. The wording was identical in every case, 'A properly constituted private limited company. Its liquid resources appear to be fully employed at the present time and we are unable to speak for the amount of your enquiry.' Banker's jargon. But I understood enough to know what it meant, Max's companies were short of cash. So short the bank wouldn't commit itself to a reference for £7,000. It confirmed what Alastair Durie had told me.

I knew now why Max was so desperate to acquire control of Bruces, he needed its assets. If he owned my shares my mother would agree to whatever he suggested and Wally wouldn't oppose him. I guessed that he would either sell the assets and inject the proceeds into his own companies in an attempt to save them or mortgage the assets to borrow more money. He was playing for high stakes, time was running out and he couldn't afford to pay me much for the shares.

Bruces' borrowing from the bank was secured by a mortgage of the property and guarantees by my mother and myself, if Max sold the other assets without repaying the bank we would be liable. Trying to recover the money was likely to be a pretty hopeless task.

On the other hand, if Max could keep Bruces going, with nothing being paid to my mother or me, the company should make profits of at least £20,000 a year. That might not be very much in the league my half-brother liked to talk about but he would find it useful if his other interests foundered. I had no doubt he would find ways, probably unethical if not actually dishonest, of boosting the profits.

I understood something else: last year, while Bruces had made a record profit, Max's companies had come close to disaster. Given his temperament, that must have been a bitter blow to his self-esteem. I, a bloody mechanic, had succeeded while he, the brilliant entrepreneur, had failed. That alone could have turned his need to out-do me into an obsession. Naïvely, I had expected him to be pleased when I told him how well we had done; after all, he was a shareholder. Instead, I had been turning the knife in the wound.

I no longer felt any lingering pangs of guilt about the terms of our father's will. Perhaps he had understood Max better than any of the rest of us and that was why he had left things as he had.

I asked Valerie to get me Peters' office. I knew I

had to move fast, there might not be much time left.

She rang back to say the number was engaged. I told her to keep trying and did my best to control my impatience. But I was uncomfortably aware that I couldn't have chosen a worse time to be seeking favours from Roger. What would he say if he knew about last night?

When the 'phone rang I started.

'Mr Peters,' Valerie announced and put him through.

'How's Jenny?' he demanded before I had a chance to say anything. 'Mother says she fell downstairs at your place.'

'A bit shaken,' I told him. 'She won't let me call the doctor but I don't think there's anything broken.'

'What happened?'

I wondered how much he knew. 'She tripped on the carpet,' I said.

'You didn't throw her?'

'No.' I wished he wouldn't be facetious. 'Can I come to see you?'

'What about?' He sounded surprised.

'I'll tell you when I see you.'

'All right. When do you want to come?'

'This afternoon?'

'If it's anything to do with Jenny—' he began.

'It isn't,' I assured him, 'it's business.'

'Okay then. About three suit you?'

'Fine,' I agreed. 'Thanks.'

I was five minutes late. Jennifer had departed just before twelve insisting that she was perfectly all right now and I was making a lot of fuss about nothing. All the same, I had an impression she didn't really mind if I was. I suggested we had lunch before she went but she said she had a class at two-thirty and, anyway, she wasn't hungry.

Roger was in his office. It wasn't exactly palatial but it still made mine look like a starving man's attic. The furniture was modern and he didn't need to turn an electric fire up full, the central heating was efficient.

'What's it all about?' he enquired. 'You sounded pretty mysterious on the 'phone. Are things worse?'

'Not the way you mean.' Now I was here I wasn't sure how to ask him. 'Do you remember yesterday I said there might be a way you could help? You told me to let you know if there was.'

He nodded. 'I remember.'

'Well, there is. Will you buy all Bruces' assets?'

He stared at me. 'Are you winding it up?'

'No.'

'I don't get it then. What are you doing?'

'I'll explain later. Will you buy them?'

'If you really want to sell we might. How much do you want?'

'Seven thousand pounds.'

His eyes opened a little wider. 'For the lot?'

'Everything but the property and the goodwill.

You can have a year's option to buy the works for thirty thousand.'

'It must be worth twice that,' he protested.

'The professional valuation was fifty-two thousand.'

'I don't understand.'

'I know who started the rumours, it was Max, my half-brother. He's done a lot of other things too. He's trying to force me into selling my shares to him cheaply because his own companies are in trouble and he wants control of Bruces. He'll either sell it at a profit or use the assets to raise more money. He can block my selling the shares to anyone else; I want to make sure that if he does get them he doesn't get anything worth having.'

Roger looked startled. 'Is that legal?'

'As long as there's no link between Bruces and Peters it'll take him a long time to do anything about it. By then he'll have run out of time. I want enough cash to keep the company running and you to let me lease back the trucks and equipment. The thirty thousand for the works will just about pay off what's left of the loan from the bank. If you have an option for a year and Max gets my shares you can exercise it, if he doesn't, once all this is settled I'll buy everything back.'

'You crafty sod.' Roger grinned.

'I'm learning.'

'You must really hate him.'

'I do. I'll tell you why one of these days. It was his

doing Jennifer fell down the stairs.'

'Are you serious?' Roger sounded incredulous. I gathered Jennifer hadn't said anything about the carpet's being tampered with.

'The stair carpet was loosened and slit,' I explained. 'Whoever did it turned up the edges so that anybody coming down was almost bound to fall. Do you remember those stairs?'

He nodded and muttered something I didn't catch. I guessed he wouldn't have been quite so angry if I had been the one to fall. I didn't blame him, I would have felt the same about him.

'I'm damned if I'll lease the stuff back to you,' he said.

I was shocked, I hadn't allowed for this.

'We can't go on without it,' I told him.

'If you think I'm going to charge you for using your own plant . . .'

I grinned. Mostly relief. 'All right. Thanks. I won't fight you over it.'

He grinned back. 'How do you know you can trust me? I might exercise the option and refuse to let you have the rest of the stuff back.'

'I don't know. But I'd rather trust you than Max.'

'Thanks very much! And you know I'd have to deal with Jenny if I ever tried to cheat you.'

I didn't know. Hope wasn't knowledge.

'Is it a deal then?' I asked him.

He nodded and held out his hand. 'It's a deal.'

'I'd like to keep Bruces' name on everything.'

'Fair enough. When do you want to tie it all up? I take it time's important?'

'As soon as possible,' I agreed.

He picked up the telephone on his desk, asked the telephonist for a number and dialled it.

'No time like the present,' he observed.

An hour later when we came out of his solicitor's office the formalities were completed.

'Thanks, Roger,' I said.

'What for?' he asked amiably. 'I've got a bargain. Is there anything else I can do?'

'Yes, come over at eight and we'll have a drink on it.'

By now, I reckoned, Max would know I was still alive. He wasn't likely to waste time before he did something about it.

Perhaps Roger noticed something in my tone, he looked at me curiously. 'You mean it?'

'Yes,' I said, 'I meant it. Is eight all right?'

'Fine.'

'I'll expect to see you, then.'

He nodded and opened the door of his car.

Driving back to Albridge I could hardly believe what I had done. Then I did and I began to feel scared. I knew I was taking a pretty big chance, not because I couldn't trust Roger but because I was playing a game at which Max was an expert. He knew all the moves and I was a beginner. Still, I couldn't see how he could get round what we had

done. If he succeeded in gaining control of Bruces now, he would get a nasty surprise. I felt my wallet in my breast pocket, Roger's cheque was tucked away there safely. The money would solve our immediate problems but I wasn't looking forward to telling Wally what I had done.

I parked the Rover in the yard and climbed the stairs to the office. Nancy was on the 'phone. Seeing me come in she said goodbye to whoever was on the other end of the line and put down the receiver.

'Is Wally in?' I asked her. I might as well get it over as soon as possible. How much would he care?

'He's in his office, I think.' Nancy fed a sheet of paper into her typewriter. 'Do you mind if I go home soon, Neil? I don't feel very well.'

I looked at her in surprise; Nancy was hardly ever ill and hadn't missed more than a few days' work because of sickness all the time I had been at Bruces.

'No, of course not,' I told her. 'Do you want me to run you home?'

'No, I'll be all right. I'll do this letter and leave your post on your desk.'

'Don't come in tomorrow if you don't feel better.'

'I expect I'll be all right then,' she said, starting to type.

Wally's office was even smaller than mine but it had a more temperate climate and somehow it never looked so bleak. I didn't know why, the

furniture was no less shabby.

'There's not going to be much for us in this Williamson job,' he remarked as I walked in.

'We knew there wouldn't be. It's work.' I couldn't make myself care very much about that just now and, anyway, Wally was always inclined to take a pessimistic view. 'There's something I've got to tell you.'

He saw I was serious and waited. He was probably thinking that when I had something to tell him it was usually trouble.

I explained what I had done.

'It's taking a risk, isn't it?' he commented when I had finished.

'How? We can trust Roger Peters.'

He nodded. 'They're a good firm; I wasn't thinking about them. Still I expect you've checked it's all right. That was Miss Peters came here the other day, wasn't it?'

'Yes.' I wondered how he knew.

'I heard her tell Nancy.'

'I should have told you first,' I said, 'but I wasn't sure if Roger would agree.'

'You wouldn't have done it if you didn't think you had to.'

Wally took a pipe out of his pocket and started to fill it from the tin on his desk. There was something reassuring about him sitting there, calmly stuffing St Bruno into his pipe as I had watched him do a hundred times before.

'Your father gave me some shares and made me a director,' he said when the pipe was drawing to his satisfaction, 'but I've never looked on it as being partly my business. D'you see? It was a present, a sort of reward because I'd been here a long time, he didn't expect me to start saying what should be done. I'd soon have heard about it if I'd tried.'

He didn't intend it as a reproach, for Wally it was a simple statement of fact. That was how he saw things and he was happy with them that way; he felt no resentment. But it was a reproach for all that. He was a director and I should have brought him more into the running of the company, not taken his acquiescence for granted all the time. He was no fool. But he was so damned self-effacing.

'I thought you might like to see this,' he remarked, handing me that morning's *Daily Express*. He wasn't even very interested in discussing what I had done, I had made a decision and he accepted it. As usual.

The paper was folded at an article about conditions in the electrical contracting industry. I kept a file of cuttings in my room, that was why he had shown it to me.

'Thanks,' I said. 'Do you want it any more?'

He shook his head.

I went back to the outer office. Nancy had gone. I opened the bottom drawer of her desk, looking for the scissors she kept there, and found them under a box of tissues. I pulled them out and then, as I was

about to cut the paper something stopped me.

The realization came like a physical shock and I stood there, the scissors in my hand, appalled. It couldn't be true.

But I knew it was.

I tried to remember something I had heard a little while ago. Then I pulled myself together. I cut out the article, replaced the scissors and went into my room.

It had started to snow again.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

There was some work on my desk I should finish today. I sat down and tried to concentrate on it but it was no good, I could think of nothing but what I understood now for the first time. I heard the rest of the staff leave and a few minutes later Wally stuck his head round the door to say that if there was nothing else I wanted, he was off. I stared at him blankly, hardly taking in what he said. Nothing, I thought, would ever be quite the same again.

Wally went out. Still I sat there thinking. In the end I gave up, put the work away in my desk and went up to the flat.

When I had hung up my coat I telephoned Stella.

'Oh, it's you,' she said ungraciously.

'Is Max there?' I asked her.

'No, he's in Germany.'

'Oh.' I hadn't been prepared for that, although I could have guessed he had been away. 'When did he go?'

'On Sunday.' She sounded irritable.

If she was telling the truth, he couldn't have tampered with the stair carpet.

'When's he coming back?' I asked.

'This evening. Why are you so interested in what

Max is doing all of a sudden.'

'Just brotherly concern.' She said something brief, pithy and obscene. 'I want to talk to him about something. I think he'll be interested.'

'I'll tell him when I see him,' Stella said.

There was a click. I replaced the 'phone. Telling Max what I had done would have to wait. It didn't matter, another day or two wouldn't make any difference and if he was in Germany he couldn't be making trouble here.

A moment's reflection reminded me that was far too optimistic, Max hadn't been here when the carpet was cut or when most of the other unpleasant incidents occurred. Indeed, the only times he had been directly involved were the contact with the estate agent, Smith, and the dinner party at his house. He had other people prepared to do his dirty work for him. If I thought I was safer because he was abroad, I was deceiving myself.

I grilled a steak with tomatoes and mushrooms, ate them and walked round to the nursing home. It was still snowing. Christmas was less than a week away, maybe it would be a white one for once. It was a time for families and I hadn't one. The works would close for a week and I would go to see my mother every day. My Christmas dinner would be a steak or a couple of chops. I told myself I didn't mind. There were thousands of people worse off than I was, what the hell was I moaning about?

It didn't make any difference.

There had been a time when I looked forward to Christmas. Barbara enjoyed putting up the decorations and having friends round for drinks before dinner on Christmas day. They were times I could still remember with pleasure. Now it was just a break with nothing much to do but go out to a pub where you met other people in the same situation, outcasts from the festivities, and probably drank too much. I wished I hadn't stopped going to church a long time ago; after all, that was the whole point of Christmas, unless you subscribed to the theory it was really all a pagan festival. Maybe this year I would go.

I wondered what Jennifer would be doing. I could imagine the Peters' house gay with people enjoying themselves; it was the sort of house that lent itself to parties. She wouldn't be interested in seeing me and I didn't blame her.

Matron came out of her room as I was crossing the hall. When I asked her how my mother was she hesitated.

'She seems to be worrying about something,' she answered slowly. 'It isn't good for her.'

'I'll see what I can do,' I promised.

Mother was lying back against the pillows. The television set was switched off and a book was lying open, face down on the bedclothes as if she had found even reading too much of an effort.

I didn't stay long and walked back to the flat more depressed than ever. It was just seven-thirty.

These days I noticed almost unconsciously whether there were any tracks in the yard; there weren't, the snow was smooth and undisturbed. Already the footprints I had left when I went out were filling and hardly discernible. I climbed the stairs to the flat, my right leg aching a bit more than usual. The carpet was still neat and firm where I had tacked it down.

On the landing I paused while I found the right key, inserted it in the lock and turned it. The door opened quietly. I stepped inside and switched on the light, closing the door behind me.

At that moment Max walked out of the bedroom.

I didn't feel any shock, only surprise that he had come while I was out.

'Hallo, Neil,' he said, smiling.

'Hallo.' I took off my coat and slung it over the back of the settee. 'You've got back then.'

'Back?'

'Stella said you were coming back from Germany this evening.'

'I came this afternoon.'

'Oh. I suppose you used the fire escape?'

'Clever. How did you know?'

'There weren't any tracks in the yard. Do you want a drink?'

'Not yet.'

Nancy came out of the bedroom and stopped just inside the room. A different Nancy. In place of the unobtrusive clothes she wore for work she was

wearing a black leather waistcoat over a white cowl-necked sweater and jeans tucked into high-heeled boots. Her hair was different, too, unless it was a wig, and she had put on a good deal of make-up.

I was startled, even mildly shocked. It was as though I had caught a glimpse of something private. I wondered if this was the real Nancy or only a role she assumed for Max's benefit. Perhaps they were both real, the two sides of one personality. She was smiling. Not a pleasant smile, it was taunting, triumphant.

'Surprised?' she asked.

I knew she wanted me to say yes.

I shook my head. 'Not that you're here. I used your scissors this afternoon; there was a tiny piece of my stair carpet caught in the blades.'

Her eyes flashed angrily but she didn't say anything.

So I had been right, it was Max Nancy had been talking to on the 'phone when I returned from seeing Roger. I had guessed when I saw the scissors. In that moment everything had fallen into place.

'Poor Stella,' I remarked.

Nancy still looked angry but Max only smiled.

'She doesn't need your sympathy,' he said. He strolled round the room, stopping in front of the picture Jennifer had given me. 'I haven't seen this before.'

'It was a present.'

'Nancy said you had a new girl friend. I hope she's rich.'

I knew it was the last thing he hoped and waited for him to come to the point.

'Have you spoken to Stella?' I asked.

He turned. 'No. Why?'

'I gave her a message for you.'

'What was it?'

'It doesn't matter now.'

The fact that Nancy was here was enough to tell me this wasn't going to be a friendly discussion. If I didn't do what they wanted the next half hour would be distinctly unpleasant. Maybe she had wanted to come, to watch.

'Make yourselves at home,' I said. 'That is, if you haven't done already.' I was playing for time and I hadn't missed the little pile of cigarette ends in the ashtray, several of them stained with lipstick.

'Oh, we have,' Max agreed, still smiling.

Nancy was standing close to me. I put my hand on her shoulder and let it slide down her back, pressing hard. She winced and swore viciously. I guessed Max wasn't a gentle lover. Maybe that was what she needed from him. He saw what I had done and laughed. Nancy moved away.

'How long have you known about us?' Max asked. He sounded genuinely curious.

'Not long.'

Three hours. When I saw the fibres in her scissors I had remembered a lot of things. The look in

Nancy's eyes the morning Bob Gurney was killed when I found Max sitting on her desk; she hadn't been quite able to keep up the pretence of disliking him. When he had gone she told me he had offered her a job when Bruces went bust. Not if, when. Later I had assumed it was Max's slip but it could as easily have been hers if she knew what he was doing.

There were other things too. Max wouldn't have known where the lorry would be the day it was hi-jacked. Nor would Lawrence. But Nancy had. And she had let the two men look round the works in the belief I wouldn't be back before they left. I didn't tell Max much but he always knew what was happening. It must have been Nancy who intercepted the reminder from Hutchinsons, knowing they would take a tough line if we didn't pay them. I wondered how many other letters she had destroyed.

The day I suggested we spend the evening together Stella had told me Max wasn't at home. But even when I knew the truth I had assumed Max was only using her, that she meant nothing to him. Now I knew better. If there was an injured party it was Stella not Nancy. Stella was the elegant, socially acceptable wife he needed. And she had plenty of money of her own. In return he had given her—what?

'You're always so bloody pleased with yourself,' Nancy said unpleasantly. 'You couldn't see how big a man Max is compared with you.'

'No,' I agreed. My leg was aching more, it always hurt when I stood for long, and I sat down on the settee. 'What are you here for?'

'Are you going to let me have your shares?' Max demanded.

'No.'

'That's definite?'

'Yes. Why should I?'

I knew why all right, because if I didn't voluntarily they would find ways of making me change my mind.

'We'll see,' Max said quietly.

'You need them, don't you? You're in trouble and you've got to get your hands on a lot of cash quickly. If you don't, your whole little world will crash.'

'You think so?'

'I know. You're not the only one who can find things out. Your bank won't say any of your companies is good for a few thousand. And there's talk in the City.'

For a moment he looked furious. Then he smiled again.

'We're wasting time,' Nancy said impatiently.

She couldn't wait for the rough stuff to start. I wondered if, when it did, she would join in or just watch, gloating. They both knew that with my dodgy leg I wouldn't stand a chance against Max, he was several inches taller and at least two stones heavier than I was. I toyed with the idea of making a

bolt for the door and rejected it at once. I wouldn't get halfway.

'What's the hurry?' I asked. My mouth was dry but I stopped myself licking my lips, I didn't want them to see. 'Let's have a drink.'

'No,' Max said curtly.

I shrugged. 'Nancy?'

'No.'

'All right. But I've told you, I'm not parting with my shares.'

'Then we'll have to persuade you to change your mind,' Max said.

'You think you can?'

'Oh yes.'

So did I. I wasn't even sure the shares were worth a severe beating, maybe permanent injury. Especially now. And there was another thing, once he had my shares he wouldn't need to bother about my mother's, she would be safe.

But I had no intention of parting with them if I could help it and I still held the trump card, Max didn't know they were worth next to nothing. Bruces' only assets now were its contracts and its goodwill, and Max had done his best to ensure that wasn't worth much.

'Let's talk about it,' I suggested.

'There's nothing to talk about.'

I didn't like the way he said it. He was enjoying this, he would be as disappointed as Nancy if I gave in easily.

'You think not?'

I glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece behind him. Ten minutes to eight. Perhaps I wouldn't have to tell him about selling the assets. If it came to the crunch and I capitulated he would find out later. I didn't want to think about what he would do then.

'How much will you give me for them?' I asked.

'Give you?'

'You want them, don't you? If the price is good enough I might think about it.'

'You're going to give them to me. In consideration of your natural love and affection.' He laughed. I didn't like the sound. That was a sick joke all right.

'I'd consider ten thousand.'

Nancy's laugh was like a sneer.

'I'm sure you would,' Max agreed. 'But I wouldn't. Get the papers, Nancy.'

She walked over to where his briefcase was lying on the table, took out some documents and handed them to him.

'Don't have any ideas about tearing them up,' he told me. 'It wouldn't do any good, I've spare ones.'

Eight minutes to eight. I wondered how much longer I could stall him. Perhaps Roger wouldn't come, it was a long way to drive in the snow for a drink. Unless he had understood.

'Let me see them,' I said.

'All in good time, I don't want you trying anything silly. Nancy.'

She reached into the briefcase again and produced two lengths of cord.

'What the hell—?' I began.

'Sit down in that chair at the table,' Max ordered.

'I'm damned if I will.' I was mad now as well as worried. If he thought he was going to truss me up . . .

His right hand moved fast. In the last fraction of a second I saw it and swayed but I was too late, the blow caught me high on the side of my face, near my eye and I felt blood spurt. Nancy gave a little sigh of pleasure.

Anger surged inside me and I started up. At that moment I was past caring what happened, all I wanted was to get my hands on Max, to hit back. To hurt him. But my leg hampered me and I staggered. He thrust out his left arm and shoved me back.

'Now sit in that chair,' he growled.

Desperately I tried to think of some way of avoiding doing what he said. I knew that once I was on that chair I would be helpless.

There wasn't one.

'Let me see those papers,' I said.

This time he handed them over. He probably reckoned I had learnt my lesson and wouldn't try anything again. I glanced at them. There were four, a share transfer, already completed apart from my signature, a letter resigning my directorship and copies of a resolution appointing Max in my place.

'Two resolutions?' I enquired.

'One for the minutes, the other for the bank.' He had thought of everything.

I read them through. Slowly.

The clock said five minutes to eight. A lot could happen in five minutes. None of it pleasant.

'Sign!' Max ordered harshly.

'I want to know what I'm signing.'

'What difference does it make?'

He was right, it didn't make any. I was in no position to bargain. I wondered what he would do when I had signed, he couldn't risk my claiming I had signed under duress.

'No,' I told him.

'Let me tie him up,' Nancy said.

Max reached out and grabbed the lapels of my jacket, pulling me up. My leg almost gave under me and I had to grab the back of the chair for support. He swung me round and pushed it against the back of my knees so that I was forced down.

'Put your hands behind you,' he said.

'If you tie me up I won't be able to sign,' I pointed out.

'Your left arm first.'

I obeyed. Nancy twisted one of the pieces of cord round my wrist several times and pulled it tight, then lashed it to the back of the chair. The rope dug deep into my flesh. Then she tied my ankles, together first, then to the chair.

'I'm damned if I'll sign,' I told them. Even to me it didn't sound very convincing. I would sign all

right, the alternatives were too unpleasant. Unless Roger arrived in the next minute or two. And the door was locked.

'We'll see about that,' Max said.

'The shares aren't worth anything. I've sold all the assets to Peters. They have an option on the works too. It's all theirs.'

For several seconds there was silence. From somewhere a long way off I heard a clock chime eight. The clock tower, it was always a minute or two fast. Max stared at me, trying to work out if I was telling the truth.

'He's lying,' Nancy said tersely. 'I'd have known if he'd sold them.'

'That's where I went this afternoon. Ask Wally, he knows.'

'I don't believe you,' Max said. But he wasn't sure.

'All you'll get is the work in hand and the goodwill. You've made sure that's not worth anything, haven't you, Max?'

'You bloody little . . .'

A vein was standing out on his forehead and he looked as if he was about to have a fit. Then he controlled himself.

'You never give up, do you?'

'I tell you, he's lying,' Nancy insisted. She was calmer than Max but her eyes glinted evilly.

'Maybe he is. We'll soon find out.'

He disappeared into the kitchen and I could hear

him opening and closing drawers. I waited, watching Nancy. I was scared.

When he came back he was carrying a long poker I kept for using as a lever. He walked over to Jennifer's painting and stabbed the poker through the middle of the canvas, slitting it from top to bottom. Blind, bitter fury welled up in me and I swore, calling him names I never used normally. Nancy slapped me hard across the mouth.

'Were you lying, Neil?' Max demanded.

'No.'

'You bloody little bastard,' Nancy said distinctly. She grabbed the poker from Max and swung it hard. Straight at my right leg.

It hit me just below the kneecap. Hot, agonizing pain shot up my leg and through my whole body. I had to bite back a scream. Sweat stood out on my forehead and for a moment I thought I was going to faint. I knew that if she did that again I would. Wished I could without her doing it. But though my head was swimming, I didn't lose consciousness.

'All right,' I muttered, 'it wasn't true.'

'There you are,' Nancy said. She sounded pleased with herself. 'Are you going to sign now or do I have to do it again?'

She hoped I would refuse, to give her the excuse.

'I'll sign,' I said. 'But bring me some water first.' There was no need for me to pretend weakness, it must have been obvious to them both.

Nancy looked at Max. He nodded and she went

into the kitchen and came back with a half pint tumbler nearly full. I guessed they reckoned that if I didn't get the water my signature would be unrecognizable and they didn't want the bank asking awkward questions. She put the glass down by my right hand.

'I can't see here,' I said, 'I'm in my own light. Put the table lamp on, Max.'

Now he thought I was ready to sign he was prepared to humour me. He was standing by the table, the lamp close to his left hand. I raised the tumbler.

His fingers closed on the switch. The faulty switch. At the same moment I threw the contents of the glass. It was a desperate gamble, if it worked I was still tied up and at Nancy's mercy. She might easily kill me.

The water splashed over Max's hand and the switch. There was a vivid flash and the light went out. Max jerked convulsively and fell backwards. His head struck the mantelpiece and he landed in an untidy heap on the floor.

My remaining strength ebbed away. If he was dead, I thought, I had killed him. I felt shock but no remorse.

Then the doorbell rang.

Nancy seemed not to hear it. She just stood there, staring down at Max. Then she dropped on her knees beside him, her fingers groping for his wrist.

'He's alive!' she said.

She straightened up, her eyes blazing with hate. Picking up the poker, she raised it and brought it crashing down again on my injured leg. She looked hardly sane.

This time I couldn't stop myself screaming. My whole body felt as if it was on fire. Dimly I told myself they had patched the leg up once, maybe they would be able to do it a second time.

Nancy was raising the poker again. But before she could bring it down something heavy thudded against the door and she hesitated.

'Here!' I tried to shout but it came out as a feeble croak.

The door shook under another blow. Then it flew open and Roger hurtled into the room. Jennifer was behind him.

Nancy backed against the wall, looked round wildly like a trapped animal. Jennifer gasped and ran across to me. My head was swimming. Somehow it seemed not to belong to me.

'I didn't sign,' I muttered.

Then I passed out.

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